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# *Robert Burns*

Thomas Finlayson Henderson

17487.58



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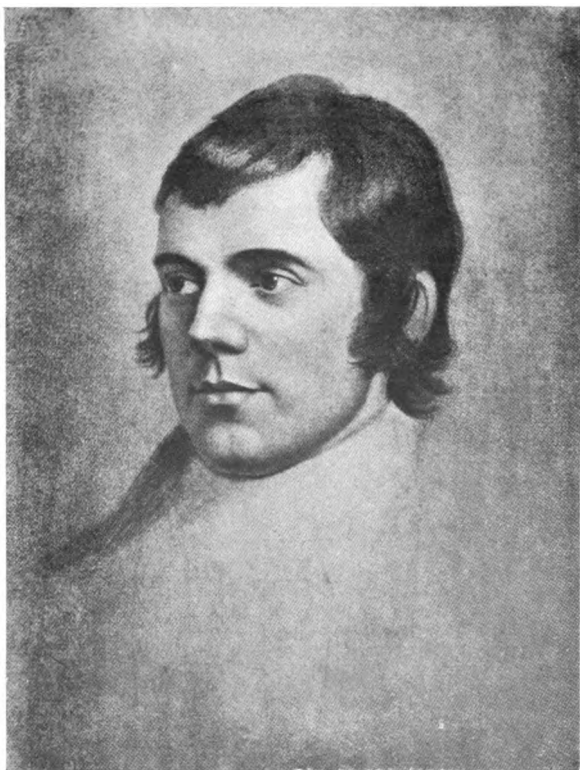
**ROBERT BURNS**



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ROBERT BURNS

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# ROBERT BURNS

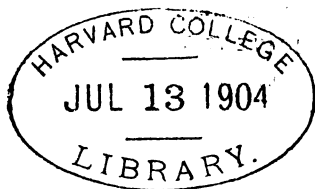
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# ROBERT BURNS

## CHAPTER I

### BOYHOOD—1759-1774

Genealogy—Parentage—Connection with Jacobitism—Allo-way—Influence of his Father—Murdoch's School—Mount Oliphant—Love of Books—Early Companions—Farm Drudgery—Solitude—The Seeds of Poesy—Dalrymple—Ayr—"The First of Human Joys"—"Handsome Nell."

**T**HE genealogy of Robert Burns, so far as it can now be ascertained, has been pretty fully set forth by Dr. Charles Rogers in his *Book of Burns*, 1891. The poet's paternal descent was from a line of tenant-farmers in Kincardineshire, which can be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. A varying tradition that the first Kincardineshire ancestor was a fugitive Argyllshire Walter Campbell, who adopted the name Burnhouse—afterwards changed to Burness—from the place of his birth or his new residence, is hardly reconcilable with ascertained facts.

Nor is even the theory of Rogers at all probable, that the Kincardineshire family derived their name from Burnhouse of Kair in Kincardineshire. There is, in fact, no reason for supposing that the Kincardineshire name, of which the earliest known form is Burnes, is of different origin from the English Burns, which in the form of Burnes is found in records as early as the tenth century. Further, the Scottish name was not confined to Kincardineshire. We have it, for example, in Midlothian, as Burnis, as early as the sixteenth century; and what is more interesting, early in the sixteenth century, and doubtless long anterior to this, the name in this form was known in Ayrshire. The Ayrshire name may derive from the old lands of Burnys in Cunningham; but in any case mention is made in the Great Seal Register of Scotland of one John Burnis, an Ayrshire notary public, as early as 1538; so that a more plausible, as well as much more romantic (if still improbable), hypothesis than the Campbell one would be that the Kincardineshire family had its ancestral home in Coila, of which their great descendant was to become the immortal bard. As for the poet's mother, Agnes Broun, her ancestral home undoubtedly was Ayrshire, where the name, of Norse origin, occurs before the days of the Bruce. But the Norse Brouns had been much inter-



THE MOTHER OF ROBERT BURNS

*From painting in possession of Rev. William Dickens*



married with the Welsh or semi-Welsh families of Strathclyde: indeed, Agnes Broun's grandmother rejoiced in the unmistakable Strathclyde Welsh name M'Grean, and her mother was a Rennie.

If, therefore, Celtic genius be claimed for Burns, he probably owed it to his maternal rather than paternal descent; and while in his mother's delight in the old songs and ballads there are symptoms of a poetic temperament, by no means manifest in the able but douce and sober-minded father, it was from her that the poet inherited his remarkable eyes. Nevertheless in his case, as in that of most lowland Scots, the question of race is hopelessly complicated; and he, moreover, possessed a personality so rich and rare as to confound all traceable laws of heredity. Of more tangible bearing on certain characteristics of his poetry is the fact that, whatever the proportion of the different racial molecules in his blood, he was on both sides of ancient peasant farmer descent, and that though dowered with a genius which in a sense raised him above mere class distinctions, he retained to the last the tastes and idiosyncrasies of the Scottish peasant.

The poet in his Jacobite moods—his Jacobitism, he admitted, was mostly "matter of sport"—was accustomed to make much of the Jacobite loyalty of his ancestors. To Lady Winifred Maxwell



Constable he wrote that he and she were "common sufferers in a cause where even to be unfortunate is glorious, the cause of heroic loyalty"; and he confided to her that his forefathers, like her own, had "shaken hands with ruin for what they esteemed the cause of their king and country." In his Autobiography he also more specifically asserted that his "forefathers rented land of the famous noble Keiths of Marshal" [Keiths, Earls Marischal], "and had the honour to share their fate,"—they "dared to welcome ruin and shake hands with infamy." All this his brother Gilbert clearly regarded as little better than a fairy tale; he advised Currie to omit this portion of the ancestral annals, and it is certain that here, as was occasionally his habit in regard to personal details, Robert was at least indulging in superlatives. His grandfather—as Ramsay of Ochertyre reported Burns to affirm—may have been "out" with the Earl Marischal in the '15, and on the Earl's forfeiture may have lost his situation as gardener at Inverugie; but, if not before, not long after this he was able to rent the farm of Kinmonth, whence in 1721 he removed to the farm of Clochnahill. Later he also rented another farm, but about 1747 money difficulties compelled him to vacate both farms. There is, however, no evidence that his troubles were due even to the '45; indeed, the only possible

rebel of the name in the official lists is one David Bumoss (possibly Burness) in the Montrose district, residence and occupation unknown ; but it may be that the poet regarded his grandfather's loss of his situation after the '15, coupled with the compulsory absence of the Earl Marischal, as the real source of the subsequent calamities, and this, in a sense, may have been true, though at the most the grandfather represented only a very mild type of the Jacobite victim.

According to Burns, it was the worldly difficulties of the grandfather that "threw" his third son William, the poet's father, "on the world at large." In 1740 the poet's father had become apprentice to a gardener, but he may have returned to assist the grandfather in the management of his farms, and it may have been the loss of the farms that caused him in 1748, when twenty-seven years of age, to leave Kincardineshire for "his many years' wanderings and sojourneyings." After two years of jobbing work in Edinburgh, frequently obtained with difficulty, he secured a situation in Ayrshire, and he finally became gardener and overseer to the Provost of Ayr, Ferguson of Doonholm, in the parish of Alloway. While in the service of the Ayr provost he became engaged to Agnes Broun, and after leasing seven acres of land at Alloway—which he designed to cultivate as a nursery and market

garden—and erecting on it with his own hands a two-roomed clay cottage, he set up house with her on 15th December 1757. Here, as humorously chronicled in “Rantin’ Rovin’ Robin,” their eldest child, the poet, first saw the light on 25th January 1759.

In the course of his experiences in Edinburgh and elsewhere William Burnes had opportunities for acquiring a varied knowledge of the world, and so shrewdly had he utilised them that, in the opinion of the son, few whom he met “understood men, their manners and their ways, equal to him.” His practical wisdom was, however, rendered partly ineffective by defects resulting, like those of the son, from the exceptional strength of his personality. In the father’s case they assumed the form of “stubborn ungainly integrity and headlong ungovernable irascibility”; and those “disqualifying circumstances,” as the son describes them, proved ultimately too many for him. But whatever the attitude of William Burnes to the world and his taskmasters, to his children it was almost wholly admirable. Their welfare was his first care, and if he viewed their interests with somewhat too serious eyes, his primary appeal was to their intelligence and affection. Less the parental disciplinarian than the interested companion, he was ever ready to respond to the curiosity of their bright intelligences, and



especially eager to foster their love of knowledge. Everything was subordinated to their good, and thus when, had the father remained gardener, Robert "must have marched off to have been one of the little underlings about a farmhouse," he, with "the assistance of his generous master, ventured on a small farm in the gentleman's estate"—his aim being "to have it in his power to keep his children under his own eye till they could discern between good and evil." In this he may have been influenced by the uncommon characteristics of his eldest son, which even at this early age could hardly have escaped the notice of such a shrewd observer of human nature. It was also apparently for his eldest son's instruction that he compiled, shortly after removing to Mount Oliphant, the "Short Manual of Religious Belief in a Dialogue between Father and Son," and indeed, as it is in the form of answers to a son, it may have been suggested by the curiosity of Robert, who states that one of the things for which he was then "a good deal noted" was "an enthusiastic idiot piety." Though in no respect speculative or philosophical, it indicates an acutely logical intelligence within a certain limited round of reflection, and if oppressively sombre in tone, it avoids the harsher aspects of the Kirk theology, one notable feature being that it discants at length upon religion "giving pleasure to animal life,"

instead of ignoring, or pretending to dislike or despise, the joys of the present world. It may have been that the remarkable boy was specially inquisitive on this point.

Robert seems to have been taught by his father until his sixth year, when he was sent to a small school at Alloway Mill ; but lacking confidence in the teacher's abilities, the father joined with a few of his more enlightened neighbours in securing the services of a clever young teacher from Ayr, John Murdoch, for whom they hired a room in the village of Alloway. After the removal of the family to Mount Oliphant in 1766, Robert—though doubtless already doing duty as “a little underling” on the farm—continued with his brother Gilbert to attend Murdoch's school for other two years. One notable feature of Murdoch's teaching was—partly aided, as Murdoch himself states, by the suggestions of William Burnes—his excellent method of instruction in English. Robert thus acquired a far more thorough knowledge of English than was then possible at any of the parish schools. Of himself he writes, that at the cost of some thrashings he “made an excellent English scholar”; and Gilbert states that the “circumstance” was “of considerable weight in the unfolding of his genius and character, as he soon became remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression, and read the few

books that came in his way with much pleasure and improvement." His love of literature, and especially poetry, was first awakened by the perusal of the more excellent portions of his school-reader, Masson's *Collection of English Prose and Verse*, the earliest thing he recollected taking pleasure in being "The Vision of Mirza," and a hymn of Addison's, beginning "How are Thy servants blest, O Lord!" of which one half-stanza in particular was music to his boyish ears—

"For though on dreadful whirls we hung  
High on the broken wave."

One of the dominant peculiarities of his character and poetry—enthusiasm for the heroic—was early fostered by the perusal of the *Life of Hannibal*, the first book he read in private, and later of the *Life of William Wallace*, the modernised and condensed version of Blind Harry's poem by Hamilton of Gilbertfield. They afforded him, he affirms, "more pleasure than any two books" he ever read afterwards. "Hannibal," he says, "gave my young ideas such a turn, that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough that I might be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest."

Another trait which developed early was his marvellous interest in his fellows. "My social disposition," he says, "when not checked by some modification of spirited pride, like our catechism's definition of Infinitude, was 'without bounds or limits.'" In his early boyhood he seems to have sought its gratification less among fellow-scholars of his own rank than among the more intelligent boys of the neighbouring Ayr. "I formed," he says, "many connections with other youngsters who possessed superior advantages—the youngling actors who were busy with the rehearsal of parts in which they were shortly to appear on that stage where, alas! I was destined to drudge behind the scenes." On those ingenuous youths it is evident that the peasant boy exercised already something of that personal sorcery of which all sorts and conditions of men and women were yet to acknowledge the matchless charm. "My young superiors," he says, "never insulted the clouterly appearance of my plough-boy carcase, the two extremes of which were often exposed to all the inclemencies of all the seasons. They would give me stray volumes of books; among them, even then, I could pick up some observations; and one, whose heart I am sure not even the 'Munny Begum's' scenes have tainted, helped me to a little French." Plainly the proper place for this

marvellous boy was in the forefront of the world's stage, and not, as he sadly phrased it, "behind the scenes"; and it must have been with tenfold more reluctance he returned to his drudgery after those glimpses of the shining prospects of his young companions.

For it was mere drudgery—drudgery severe and unmitigated—to which he had to return. The father's venture had not proved a happy one. The soil of Mount Oliphant was of that quality which no labour and skill could render very fruitful, and accidental losses brought almost hopeless embarrassments, especially after the family fell into the hands of a pitiless factor, whose sole endeavour was to secure from them the last farthing of rent. The difficulty could be met only by cutting down expenses to the lowest possible figure, and by taxing to the utmost the endurance and strength of each member of the family able to work. Neither man- nor maid-servant were they able to afford, and therefore Robert, as the oldest, had almost from his thirteenth year to do the work of a man and more. He himself describes his life at this time as combining "the gloom of a hermit with the toil of a galley slave." By virtue of marvellous stamina and vitality he survived the ordeal, and even emerged from it in apparent possession of exceptional bodily strength; but there is good



reason to suppose that its effects on both his physical and mental constitution were permanently hurtful. "I doubt not," writes Gilbert, "but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was so often afflicted through his whole life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evenings with a dull headache, which, at a future period of his life, was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night time." Even more injurious and depressing than the ceaseless bodily toil must, to one of his boundless sociality and eager outlook on life, have been the terrible monotony, and especially the lack of boyish companions. "We rarely," says Gilbert, "saw anybody but the members of our own family. There were no boys of our own age or near it in the neighbourhood." The main compensating advantage was a particularly close intimacy with, for his rank in life, an exceptionally intelligent father. "He conversed," says Gilbert, "familiarily with us on all topics as if we had been men"; and Robert affirms that it was to his father's observation and experience he was indebted for most of his pretensions to wisdom—by which wisdom he meant probably the



theoretical rather than the practical variety. Happily the boys were also able, at meal-times and other odd moments, to indulge a little in the noble recreation of reading, their father doing his utmost to supply them with instructive—perhaps too merely instructive—books. Hard monotonous toil, an almost total lack of boyish companionships and amusements, intellectual intercourse with a remarkable but very serious-minded father, the one recreation of access to a few instructive books—it was Spartan, and even too Spartan discipline! Its influence could not be quite wholesome—either physically, mentally, or morally; and if, in the case of one so variously and richly gifted as Burns, it must have helped mightily to develop reflection, it no doubt also tended to arouse bitter feelings of rebellion, not of course against his sorely burdened and heroic father, but against some of the social arrangements of this best of possible worlds.

Yet the peculiar character of his boyhood had probably a good deal to do with the apotheosis of Burns as a bard. While in different and happier circumstances he might have found scope for his abounding energy in other fields of ambition, the only break in the dead wall of his monotony was, in his boyhood, through the gate of literature. By it alone could his imagination communicate with the wonderful world outside the narrow

limits of his experience. Thus literature became to him in a peculiar sense an anchor of hope; and, overflowing with ideas and emotions which could find no sufficient scope within the limited sphere of his practical possibilities, it was almost inevitable that, sooner or later, he should seek to emulate especially those forms of literature which had afforded him so much consolation and delight. How far his poetic sensibilities were due to the early strain of his nervous system it is of course impossible to say, though this, as well as the rustic solitude of his early life, must have assisted to quicken them. He also acknowledges special poetic indebtedness to an old maid of his mother's, "remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition." "She had," he says, "I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, enchanted towers, giants, dragons, and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of philosophy to shake off these idle terrors." Is it, then, assuming too much

to suppose that this credulous old maid has even left some definite impress on portions of his verse? That she is, for example, partly responsible for the mental condition which conjured up the vision of the last enemy in "Death and Doctor Hornbook"? Or that to her influence is to be traced some of the more weird effects of "Tam o' Shanter"? Or, not to mention various apposite references to the spectral world in other verse, that but for her he might never have penned "The Address to the De'il," as he certainly would not have penned it with such a wealth of droll and graphic allusion?

L A slight break in the toilsome round of monotony occurred to him in the summer of 1772, when, for one quarter, he was sent, week about with his brother Gilbert, to the parish school of Dalrymple to improve his writing; and in the following year he had a more enjoyable holiday time, one week before harvest and two weeks after it being spent with his old teacher Murdoch at Ayr in revising his English grammar and commencing the study of French. Returning armed with a French dictionary and grammar and the *Adventures of Telemachus*, he made rapid progress in ability, at least, to intrepert the language, being very soon able to read any French author in prose. With Latin, the study of which he attempted without help, he was less

successful. He had no interest in mere linguistic peculiarities, his aim being to get access to the literature. In the case of Latin the linguistic peculiarities were more difficult to master; and finding the study "dry and uninteresting," he recurred to it only intermittently, making it, according to Gilbert, a sort of mental refuge when "suffering from any little chagrin or disappointment, particularly in his love affairs"; but "the Latin seldom predominated more than a day or two at a time, or a week at most." His love affairs—for years the malady appeared, if not in mild, at least in short and far from fatal forms—began early, his introduction to "the first of human joys" occurring in his fifteenth year, when he had as his partner in the harvest "a bewitching creature who just counted an autumn less." The "girl," he says, "sung a song, which was said to be composed by a small country laird's son, on one of his father's maids, with whom he was in love; and I saw no reason why I might not rhyme as well as he; for, excepting smearing sheep and casting peats (his father living in the moors), he had no more scholarship than I had." The result was his earliest song, "Handsome Nell," bearing patent marks of juvenility and lack of rhyming experience, but containing also a few ingenuous felicities, which betray at least the poet in embryo. Of the song he, some ten years after-

wards, inserted an interesting criticism in his First Common-Place Book, giving the preference to the fifth stanza :—

“ She dresses ay sae clean and neat,  
Baith decent and genteel;  
And then there’s something in her gait  
Gars onie dress look weel,”

L which is at least delightfully naïve and sincere. Of the last stanza he observes that it “has several minute faults”; but he adds, “I composed it in a wild enthusiasm of passion, and to this hour I never recollect it but my heart melts and my blood sallies at the remembrance.” Here it is, the usual epitome of the lover’s philosophy :—

“ ’Tis this in Nelly pleases me,  
’Tis this enchants my soul!  
For absolutely in my breast  
She reigns without control.”

r “Thus,” says the rustic bard, in his Autobiography, “with me began love and poesy, which at times have been my only, and, till within this last twelve months” [he wrote in August 1787], “have been my highest enjoyment.” How long Nellie continued to reign within his breast we have no information. His passion—such as it was—most likely died gradually out after it had “got vent in

[rhyme." Indeed, he says that he never expressly told her that he loved her; and though he was of opinion that she also had "caught the contagion," he was perhaps unable to summon up courage even to recite to her his verses.



## CHAPTER II

### EARLY MANHOOD—1774-1780

Kirkoswald — Study of Mankind — Taverns — Peggy Thomson—Love and Trigonometry—Dancing Schools —Offends his Father—Dissipation—Sociality—Love Adventures—Lack of Aim—Stirrings of Ambition—Lochlea — Tarbolton Bachelors' Club — Foppery — Disputes with the Orthodox—Miscellaneous Reading —Early Poetry.

WE resume the story of the poet's life after the passage of some twelve months or more so uneventful that he has nothing to record of them, except to mention that he was "perhaps the most ungainly, awkward being in the parish," and that "no *solitaire* was less acquainted with the ways of the world." In 1775 he had, however, the exceptional experience of a summer "spent a good distance from home, at the smuggling village of Kirkoswald, to learn mensuration and surveying." Here he lodged with his mother's brother, Samuel Broun, who, if



we may judge from the tone of the letter of the nephew to him several years afterwards, could hardly have been so sternly Puritan in his notions as the poet's father; and at any rate he seems to have left the young man very much to his own devices. Though he made "pretty good progress in his studies," he there also made "a greater progress in the knowledge of mankind"—the mankind not being always the more reputable portion of the community. "The contraband trade," he states, "was at this time very successful; scenes of swaggering riot and roving dissipation were as yet new to me, and I was no enemy to social life." Thus, so he affirms, he "here learnt to look unconcernedly on a large tavern-bill, and to mix without fear in a drunken squabble"; and one naturally asks, when or by whom was the tavern-bill finally paid, for the youthful reveller must have been but sparingly supplied with pocket money? Probably the proper reply is that the "unconcern" he then learnt about tavern-bills was mainly theoretical, and not put into practice till a good many years afterwards;<sup>1</sup> and on the whole we may infer that he was rather an interested and amused spectator

<sup>1</sup> As late as January 1783 he wrote to Murdoch that, "especially in tavern matters," he was "a strict economist, not indeed for the sake of the money," but because he scorned "to fear the face of any man living," etc.

of those scenes of dissipation than a full participant in them. From other sources we learn that he also took part in various athletic contests, displaying, although a mere novice, great skill as well as agility and strength; and the visit was moreover eventful from the fact that he then obtained particulars of the story which he was to utilise for "Tam o' Shanter." Withal, however, he "went on with a high hand" in his studies "till," he jocularly says, "the sun entered Virgo" [23rd August], "a month which is always a carnival in my bosom. A charming *filette*, who lived next door to the school, overset my trigonometry, and set me off in a tangent from the sphere of my studies." Happily for his studies, and perhaps for his further peace of mind, when the intrusion happened, but one week more of his stay at Kirkoswald remained; and although during it he "did nothing but craze the faculties" of his "soul about her and steal out to meet with her," he seems, judging from his interest in a mere literary correspondence with his school-fellows, to have regained much of his tranquillity soon after his return home, the passion perhaps being "soothed into quiet" after its "ebullition" in "song second" ["Now Westlin' Winds"] in the Kilmarnock edition, or rather, we must suppose, a very imperfect form of this song. In the First Common-Place Book the song appears

merely as a fragment of eight lines, corresponding pretty nearly with the first eight lines of the published version. This final version is much too finished a production for the lad of seventeen, and is, besides, too reminiscent and tranquil in tone, as well as too full of irrelevant references, to have been the mere ebullition of a passion. The name of the girl was Peggy Thomson. According to Mrs. Begg, the poet's sister, the passion was renewed in 1784, but of this he himself says nothing, and the Peggy alluded to in a letter of November 1784 may have been not Peggy Thomson, but Montgomerie's Peggie, whom he, probably about this time, discovered to be the "rightful property of another." But the acquaintanceship in some form or other was no doubt renewed, for after she had been for some time the wife of a Kirkoswald friend, Burns, when about, as he supposed, to set out to the West Indies, presented her with a copy of his Kilmarnock volume with the inscription beginning—

"Once fondly loved, and still remembered dear."

And he relates that when on this last occasion he took farewell of her, "neither she nor I could speak a syllable."

One result of the Kirkoswald experiences was that shortly after his return home he, in

defiance of the paternal wishes, resolved, "in order," as he says, "to give his manners a brush," though his purpose was no doubt more comprehensive, to go to a country dancing school. His young manhood was beginning decisively to assert itself. His momentary glimpse of freedom only made him realise more keenly the dreariness of the old round of toil; and the recoil from "the gloom of the hermit" had already partly commenced. Nor here was it the son but rather the father that was at fault, for the case was one in which some kind of diversion was urgent; and, moreover, it was vain to suppose that this remarkable young man would be content to model himself merely after the pattern of his father. The father's convictions were, however, as inexorable as the son's; he dared not carry out his veto, but he could not excuse or forget. "From that instant of rebellion," writes the son, "my father took a kind of dislike to me, which I believe was one of the causes of that dissipation which marked my future years." He adds that by "dissipation" he means "dissipation comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterian country life"; but since he nevertheless practically admits that he carried this "dissipation," harmless or innocent though for some years it was, to excess, we may well believe that had the father been more tolerant

and sympathetic, the son would have been more inclined to have taken a genuine interest in the work of the farm, and would have been less reckless of his worldly interests. As he explains, with characteristic candour and insight, "the great misfortune" of his "life was never to have an aim," and his father's dislike only made him more careless of finding one. Even thus early he had "stirrings of ambition," but they "were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave." For years he had to concentrate his main attention merely on the completion of his "daily tale of bricks"; and although, on the removal of the family in 1777 to the new farm of Lochlea in Tarbolton parish, some relief was obtained from the stress of poverty and the strain of labour, the immediate future revealed to him nothing regarding which it was possible or, if possible, worth while to form a hope. His exceptional intelligence and latent fervour of ambition only made his outlook seem the darker. "Thus," he adds, with his uncompromising regard for facts, "abandoned of view or aim in life, with a strong appetite for sociability (as well from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark) and a constitutional hypochondriac taint which made me fly solitude: add to all these incentives to social life, my reputation for bookish knowledge,

a certain wild logical talent, and a strength of thought, something like the rudiments of good sense, made me generally a welcome guest. So 'tis no great wonder that always 'where two or three were met together, there was I in the midst of them.' " Further, he mentions that as he had no interest in his labours except when he was "in actual exercise," he spent the evenings in "the way after his own heart"; and that was after the usual manner of country lads, to whom, he tells us, "the ardent hope, the stolen interview, the tender farewell, are the greatest and most delicious part of their enjoyments." As for the poet's own particular heart, it was, he says, "completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up with some goddess or other"; "and," he continues, with somewhat halting grammar, "like every other warfare in this world, I was sometimes crowned with success, and sometimes mortified with defeat." All this is fully corroborated by Gilbert, who states that his brother was constantly "the victim of some fair enslaver," and also that when once he had selected anyone for his attention he "instantly invested her with a stock of charms out of the plentiful stores of his imagination." The access of the passion was, moreover, marked by an "agitation of his mind and body" that excelled everything of the kind he "ever knew in real life." For the time

being "one generally reigned paramount in his affections ; but as Yorick's affections flowed out towards Madame de L—— at the remise door, while the eternal vows of Eliza were upon him, so Robert was frequently encountering other attractions which formed so many underplots in the drama of his love." But all "those connections," we are told, "were governed by the strictest rules of virtue and modesty." Violent though the attack was for the moment, it very soon reached its climax, and then subsided as the glamour cast by his poetic imagination began to dissolve. Apart from that glamour, the poet, as is evident from his song on "The Tarbolton Lasses," had thus early a very shrewd knowledge of the dispositions, gifts, and pretensions of his female acquaintances.

Yet with all his manifold sociality, and with "*vive l'amour ! et vive la bagatelle !*" as his sole principles of action," his life was not so aimless as it seemed. On the contrary, as he wrote to his friend Thomas Orr, he was studying as well as he could "men, their manners and their ways," so that he shortly came to think, as he relates to Murdoch in 1783, that he seemed "to be one sent into the world to see and observe." As regards the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, started, it may be at his instigation, in 1780, it was apparently intended to act as a partial restraint

on miscellaneous sociality, the purpose of the youthful founders being that, while they should forget their "cares and labours in mirth and diversion," they might not "transgress the bounds of innocence and decorum." The aim of those intelligent and honest-hearted youths was most laudable; but the club—with its well-meaning principles and its common-place round of debates—can hardly have influenced appreciably the poet's future. Already—as is manifest from a description by a fellow-clubman and fellow-versifier, David Sillar—his individuality had begun to render him conspicuous among his fellows; and he was clearly quite aware of his own powers. Conscious of a somewhat striking personality, and desirous of appearing to advantage in the eyes of rustic beauty, he wore at church the "only tied hair in the parish," and provided himself with a plaid of a special brown colour, which "he wrapped in a particular manner round his shoulders." Further, he liked in company to display his satiric gifts, which, while they "set the rustic circle in a roar," also aroused "a suspicious fear" in the hearts of his bucolic audience. In the kirkyard before service he delighted in "getting up an argument," with the view mainly of "puzzling the Calvinism" of the orthodox, who "couldna tell what to mak o' young Burns o' Lochlea." Nor, while sharpening his



wits and enriching his experience by intercourse with a very miscellaneous set of acquaintances, did he neglect such mental culture as was obtainable from the limited range of miscellaneous reading that was within his reach. In addition to a variety of the stock religious works of the Scottish peasants' home, it included, at a very early period, *The Spectator*, Pope's Works, some Plays of Shakespeare, Allan Ramsay's Works, and a Select Collection of English Songs, as well as "those excellent New Songs that are hawked about the country in baskets or exposed in stalls in the streets." The Collection of Songs [*The Lark*, 1746 and 1765, a small volume which he could carry in his pocket] "was," he says, "my *vade mecum*. I pored over them driving my cart, or walking to labour, song by song, verse by verse, carefully noting the tender or sublime from affectation or fustian." At Kirkoswald his reading was further enlarged by what he describes as "the very important addition of Thomson's and Shenstone's Works; and he never ceased to retain his admiration for what he termed the "divine elegies" of that "celebrated poet." A little later *Tristram Shandy* and *The Man of Feeling* became his "bosom favourites"; some time afterwards his reading was increased by two stray volumes of *Pamela*, and one of *Ferdinand*, *Count Fathom*; and

at some unknown date, possibly about this later period, he came into possession of a copy of Macpherson's *Ossian*.

The above list included practically the whole range of his reading until his twenty-third year; and the inability to obtain a larger supply of books compelled him to have recourse to repeated perusal, the more important and favourite volumes being not only thoroughly mastered but almost committed to memory, a fact which partly accounts for the numerous echoes of the sentiments and phraseology of eighteenth century writers, especially in his earlier poetry, and more particularly in his attempts at English verse. Few of the poems of this very early period, that have been preserved, manifest any marked individuality. A few religious pieces, inspired mainly by hypochondria, merely repeat the laudable sentiments of traditional belief, and, though redeemed from mere common-place by a certain justness and dignity of expression, are modelled very much on the lines of the metrical translations of the Psalms of David. Others, as "Corn Rigs," "O Tibbie, I ha'e seen the Day," and "It's o' Fickle Fortune O," savour of the ingenuous naturalism of The Excellent New Songs, or the easy-going philosophy of the Collections; "John Barleycorn" is an excellent revision of an old ballad, descended from very old

Scottish verses in praise of Bacchus ; " The Lass of Cessnock Banks " owes perhaps some of its modish artificiality to Shenstone, and its more specific characteristics to *Ossian* or The Song of Solomon ; and a " Tragic Fragment " in blank verse, written, he says, when he " was about eighteen or nineteen," is merely an awkward incursion into the realms of melodramatic fustian. The only verses of this period—if he be right in assigning them to this period—that give token of genuine inspiration are, " The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie," which, though in no wise so exquisitely conceived or happily expressed as the later " Poor Mailie's Elegy," is a characteristic example of his skill in the blending of humour with sympathetic pathos.

## CHAPTER III

### IRVINE AND ITS RESULTS—1781-1783

Desire to Marry—Elison Begbie—Jilted—Irvine Partnership—Hypochondria—Destruction of Shop—Town Life—Richard Brown—A Fashionable Failing—Return to Lochlea—Death of his Father—First Common-Place Book—The Poet on Himself—Freemasonry—Elizabeth Paton—Penitential and Defiant Verses—"The Cutty Stool"—"The Poet's Welcome"—Influence of Fergusson.

**I**N his twenty-third year the poet, according to Gilbert, being "anxious to be in a situation to marry," entered into partnership with a flax-dresser at Irvine. He himself says that he entered on the enterprise "partly through whim," and partly because he "wished to set about doing something in life"; but his reason for giving so vague an account of his intentions was doubtless that when about to set out to Irvine he had been deprived of his special inducements for contemplating matrimony. The desire to be in

a situation to marry was not a mere general sentiment. It had been awakened by his acquaintanceship with Elison Begbie, a farmer's daughter, whose "twa sparkling roguish een" he had celebrated in "The Lass of Cessnock Banks." After courting her assiduously for some time in stolen interviews, he wound up the attack by a series of elaborate epistles, full of pattern sentiments and reflections, and modelled, both as to tone and style, on the letters "by the most eminent writers," of which he possessed a copy. As he himself half suspected, their manner is too solemn; and, although he particularly prided himself on his abilities at a *billet doux*, they are neither very ardent nor, so far as one can judge without knowing the peculiarities of the case, particularly tactful. To attempt by cold argument to convince the average young woman that she possesses qualities of mind and heart that are really worthy of commendation does not strike one as a specially effective method of courtship—or at least not so effective as more exaggerated outpourings. Yet knowing that she was fully aware of his passion, his aim may have been to prove to her that he was less a madcap person than she might suppose. In any case the letters are patently sincere, and were evidently inspired by very deep affection. This is even more manifest in his reply to her final refusal,

where he refers to the "charming qualities" of her "character," which, he affirms, "heightened by an education much beyond anything I have ever met in any woman I ever dared to approach, have made an impression on my heart that I do not think the world can ever efface." As from a ploughman to a servant girl, this is a little too stately; but even then Burns was proud as an emperor; and the stateliness in no degree detracts from the sincerity.

The blow of refusal fell upon him like a bolt from the blue; for so confident was he that, before making his proposals, he had arranged to enter into the partnership at Irvine, so as to be "in a situation to marry her." She also permitted him to go on with his proposals without, until the very last, letting fall a hint that she was unable to gratify his hopes. He seems therefore to have been fully justified in asserting that loss of her was what he "had really no right to expect." But even apart from its unexpectedness, the blow was clearly a pretty staggering one. His attachment was much more than a passing fancy; it was perhaps the most heartfelt of all his attachments. Even after his heart had "been caught" by Jean Armour, he refers to the loss of Alison Begbie as the loss of the woman he "adored"; and, although this word was too often at the end of his pen, the significance of its use

in this instance is strengthened by the consideration that it was not used to the girl but of her, and that it was used after the adoring had ceased. As he also specially respected her talents and character, we may well believe that her loss—if she was capable of becoming attached to him—was a very serious misfortune; although it is vain to speculate how marriage, at this period of his life, would have affected his poetic career.

But even the Irvine as well as the marriage scheme failed him. Indeed, a very short acquaintance with his partner must have convinced him that no good could come out of the alliance; and his conviction of this tended seriously to aggravate the severe attack of hypochondria, brought on by the sudden shattering of his matrimonial hopes. Even the more lightsome surroundings and interests of town life, which in other circumstances he would have welcomed with the keenest expectancy, seemed now only to aggravate his complaint, until he became reduced to a condition of almost passive hopelessness. In a letter to his father, 27th December, he lugubriously affirms that he “was not formed for the bustle of the busy nor the flutter of the gay”; and, convinced that he would “never again be capable of entering into such scenes,” he expresses his transport “at the thought that ere long, perhaps very soon,” he

should "bid an eternal adieu to all the pains, and uneasiness, and disquietudes of this weary life." To one in such a desperate position—forsaken by his mistress, and in the hands of a rascally partner—the sudden loss of his insignificant worldly all, though it gave to his calamity the last artistic touch, could hardly be regarded as greatly increasing the sum total of it. "To finish the whole"—it is thus he relates the catastrophe,—"while we were giving a welcome carousal to the New Year, our shop, by the drunken carelessness of my partner's wife, took fire and burned to ashes; and I was left, like a true poet, not worth sixpence."

After the destruction of his shop he appears to have stayed on some months at Irvine, being perhaps undecided as to what he should next turn his attention to. The additional expense of remaining where he was, was small, for his lodging cost him only a shilling a week, and he lived mainly on oatmeal sent from home. Until the spring was well advanced his services would not be of so urgent importance on the farm; and "town life," as he calls it, was now perhaps beginning to have attractions for him, as the hypochondriacal fit began to subside. In this small but enterprising shipping port, human nature was to be studied in more diverse and curious forms than among rural communities; and



more particularly that variety of it over which law and custom exercised but imperfect control. "I have often," wrote Burns in his First Common-Place Book, and he was probably referring mainly to his Irvine experiences, "coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of BLACKGUARDS sometimes further than was consistent with the safety of my character; those who, by thoughtless prodigality or headstrong passions, have been driven to ruin; though disgraced with follies, nay sometimes 'stained with guilt and crimson'd o'er with crimes,' I have yet found, among not a few instances, some of the noblest virtues, magnanimity, generosity, disinterested friendship, and even modesty in the highest perfection."

But the chief attraction of Irvine, and the "principal thing" which there gave his "mind 'a turn," was a "bosom friendship" with a young fellow," the "first [*sic*] created being" he "had ever seen," his mind being "fraught with courage, independence, and magnanimity, and every noble, manly virtue." This wonderful paragon was one Richard Brown, a sea captain, who, owing to the interest taken in him by a rich patron, had received a much better education than was usual with those of his calling, and who during his adventurous career had acquired a "knowledge of

the world," which, in the eyes of the inexperienced and imaginative, though exceptionally intelligent, country lad, surrounded him with quite a heroic halo. "I loved him," he says, "I admired him to a degree of enthusiasm, and I strove to imitate him. I in some measure succeeded; I had the pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. His knowledge of the world was vastly superior to mine, and I was all attention to learn. He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when Woman was the presiding star; but he spoke of a certain fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. Here his friendship did me a mischief, and the consequence was that soon after I resumed the plough I wrote the 'Welcome.'"

In his evolution of effects from causes Burns is here much too rapid, for the "Welcome" — to his daughter by Elizabeth Paton—was not written until more than two years and a half after he resumed the plough, the infant not appearing until November 1784. Nor perhaps is his method of telling his story entirely to be trusted. In writing to Dr. Moore, as to all outside his own class, he was given to adopt a certain pose. Though the failing was a fashionable one, it was quite common among the poet's rustic companions, who could speak of it with

quite as much "levity" as the fashionable and travelled Brown. But if in this respect the friendship of Brown did him a "mischief," he seemingly owed to Brown the kindling of the first sparks of his poetic ambition. "You told me," so he wrote to him after he had become famous, "on my repeating some verses to you, that you wondered I could resist the temptation of sending verses of such merit to the magazines. It was from this remark I derived the idea of my own pieces, which encouraged me to endeavour the character of a poet."

It was perhaps less with deep chagrin than with listless unconcern that Burns decided to return to his old round of toil. By Alison Begbie's dismissal of him he had been deprived of the special motive for seeking to better his condition of life, and his hopes of bettering it were also meanwhile completely blasted. He was thus again in the old quandary of "not having an aim," and how to find one had become a greater conundrum than ever, for, as he relates in his Autobiography, "the clouds of misfortune were gathering thick round" his "father's head; the worst of which was—he was visibly far gone in a consumption." To the strenuous, lofty-minded, and nobly independent, but stubborn and irascible, old man, death, on 13th February 1784, came as the only merciful solution of his difficulties; for, owing to

a lawsuit with a landlord, legally entitled to his "pound of flesh" and determined to have it, irretrievable worldly ruin was fast hastening to overwhelm him.

Of the effect of all this crowd of pregnant experiences on the poet we have a pretty faithful record in his First Common-Place Book, begun in April 1783. The state of mental fermentation it reveals indicates how great a "turn" his mind had got, as well by the sudden evanishment of his "view of settling in life" as by the influence of Brown in teaching his "pride" to "flow in proper channels." He was beginning to find himself, and was apparently not a little surprised and bewildered at the discovery. All unconsciously he was leaving the old ruts marked out by the wheels of tradition, and marking out a special course for a career of his own—a career which was to be greatly hampered by untoward circumstances, and chequered a good deal both by misfortunes and follies, but not so hampered or chequered as to prevent him winning the high, immortal remembrance of his fellow-countrymen and the world. The Common-Place Book indicates a character greatly swayed by moods and emotions, but enlightened by a very inquisitive and piercing intelligence, eager to understand the realities of things, and very puzzled how to reconcile the old traditional

opinions with his insight into his own and other human hearts. He begins by describing himself as one who "had little art in making money, and still less in keeping it; but was, however, a man of some sense, a great deal of honesty, and unbounded goodwill to every creature, rational and irrational"; and he immediately proceeds to tell us that whatever may have been said against Love, still he thinks it "in a great measure deserves the highest encomiums that have been passed upon it." In his next entry, in August, he ventures upon the remark that "there is certainly some connection between Love and Music and Poetry," and this is followed by a narrative of how he became a poet by falling in love with the young girl, "Handsome Nell." Then in September we have a dissertation on Remorse and Penitence, illustrated by a woful example in blank verse. In March following he returns to the same theme with a similar example, followed by a relation of his views regarding blackguards, and a narrative of his miseries as a hypochondriast, the memory of which still made him shudder. Then in April he turns to a consideration of his own peculiar sources of pleasure and enjoyment, informing us that one of the most enrapturing of these was "to walk in the sheltered side of a wood, or high plantation, in a cloudy, winter day, and hear

a stormy wind howling among the trees and raving over the plain." "It is," he asserts, "my best season for devotion; my mind is rapt up in a kind of enthusiasm to Him who, in the pompous language of Scripture, 'walks on the Wings of the Wind.'" In illustration he then gives us his melancholy dirge on "Winter," winding up with this invocation to the Power Supreme—

"Since to enjoy Thou dost deny,  
Assist me to resign!"

This is followed by "My Father was a Farmer O," the sentiments of which are, he says, the genuine feelings of his heart; their substance, nevertheless, being that he is "as well as a monarch in his palace," and that he has sworn that, come what will, he'll "ne'er be melancholy." Shortly after this he confides to us that he has "been all along a miserable dupe to love," and "been led into a thousand weaknesses and follies by it," but is recompensed by the consideration that it has enabled him "to distinguish foppery and conceit from real Passion and Nature"; in proof of which he sets down the song which informs the world that he has no other "care in life" but to "love his Nannie O"—adding that the feeling it expressed was at the time "real," though Gilbert asserts that Agnes Fleming was only one of many to whom he was devoting some of his "roving attention."

Following this we have a dissertation on two general classes: the Grave and the Merry, into which the "whole species of young men may be naturally enough divided," though he admits there are exceptions in two varieties of blockheads: (1) those "men of conceit rather than genius" who are pedantically engrossed by some "whimsical notions in some art or science," so that they could not think or speak with much pleasure of any other subject; and (2) "mere insipid blockheads, who may be said to live a vegetable life." The grave are those "goaded on by the love of money," or those "whose darling wish is to make a figure in the world." With neither variety of this class—it being with him at present a case of very sour grapes—will the bard have anything to do, and he proceeds to dilate with enthusiasm on the merry. They "are the men of pleasure of all denominations, the jovial lads who have too much fire and spirit to have any settled line of action, but without much deliberation follow the strong impulses of nature,—the thoughtless, the careless, the indolent, and in particular he who, with a happy sweetness of natural temper and a cheerful vacancy of thought, steals through life, generally, indeed, in poverty and obscurity; but poverty and obscurity are only evils to him who can sit gravely down and make a repining comparison between his own

situation and that of others; and lastly, to grace the quorum, such are generally the men whose heads are capable of all the towering of genius, and whose hearts are warmed with the delicacy of feeling." A year and more before this he had written to Murdoch that his favourite authors were those of the sentimental kind—Shenstone, Thomson, Sterne, *The Man of Feeling*, *The Man of the World*, and *Ossian*—after which "glorious models," he seriously asserted, he was endeavouring to form his conduct, affirming also that "'tis incongruous, 'tis absurd to suppose that the man whose mind flows with sentiments lighted up at their sacred flame—the man whose heart distends with benevolence to the whole human race, he "who can soar above this little scene of things"—can "descend to mind the paltry concerns about which the terræfilial race fret and fume and vex themselves." "O how the glorious triumph," he exclaims, "swells my heart! I forget that I am a poor insignificant devil, unnoticed and unknown, stalking up and down fairs and markets, when I happen to be in them, reading a page or two of mankind, and 'catching the manners living as they rise,' whilst the men of business jostle me on every side as an idle encumbrance in their way." But here, with all his glorious sentiments, Burns unconsciously reveals what a very galling thought it was to him to be "a poor insignificant



devil," and how really barren was his enjoyment in soaring imaginatively above his "little scene of things." At any rate, some fifteen months later he had, as we have seen, come to the conclusion that if the mean ambitions of his "little scene of things" were beneath his notice, its pleasures were by no means to be despised; and he had begun even to comfort himself by at least the faint hope that he might even be capable "of all the towering of genius." Also, after his dissertation on the Merry and the Men of Genius, he proceeds to set down "Green grow the Rashes O," which, with its inimitably gay mockery of the "grave," bears ample testimony both to his genius and to his, at least intermittent, merriness. Yet hardly has he, so to speak, divested himself of all other responsibilities, except those of being merry and a genius, than he proceeds, very gravely indeed, to discuss whether the "turn of mind and pursuits of such a one as the above verses describe" are fitted to make him a member of "that society of the Pious and the Good which reason and revelation teach us to expect beyond the grave"; and he fails in reaching a more satisfactory conclusion than that to read *Ossian*, Shakespeare, Thomson, Shenstone, Sterne, and to have "at all times some heart's-dear bonny lass in view," is at least as good a way to "gain Heaven"—"which by the bye," so it is that this devotee of merriness puts

it, "is no mean consideration"—as to "strain straight forward" to gain "some of life's little eminences," where he who may gain them may "see and be seen a little more conspicuously than what, in the pride of his heart, he is apt to term the poor, indolent devil he has left behind him." From all which we may conclude that the poet was less set on gaining Heaven than a somewhat different eminence, either of pleasure or achievement, from those little eminences which he despised, partly because even they, as yet, were beyond his reach.

But for Burns mere misanthropy was an impossibility. Nor whatever—in his dawning consciousness of genius and of the possession of sentiments that lifted him above his little "scene of things"—may have been his sense of the incongruity of his squalid toils, and of his close association with ignorant and coarse acquaintances, almost wholly immersed in mere bucolic interests, did he ever make any pretence of standing aloof from his fellows. On the contrary, after returning from Irvine he became more sociable than ever, finding scope for this irrepressible trait of his character in joining a lodge of Freemasons at Tarbolton, in whose proceedings he took such a warm interest that in the summer of 1784 he was chosen deputy master. For the lodge he also composed a song, "No Churchman am I," modelled

on the jovial but brainless ditties in the English Collection. Also—though he had meanwhile no very certain prospect of becoming settled in life—he was assiduous as ever in paying his respects to any of the rustic beauties whose homely charms might for the moment captivate his passing fancy; and at last his enrolment amongst the “jovial lads who have too much fire and spirit to have any settled line of action, but without much deliberation follow the strong impulses of nature,” led to his entanglement with Elizabeth Paton, a servant on the farm. She is described by Burns’s sister, Mrs. Begg, as having “an exceedingly handsome figure” (which with the bard counted for much), but as otherwise “plain-looking” (no uncommon characteristic, Gilbert informs us, of his female captivators), and though “active, honest, and independent,” very “rude and uncultivated,” with “a contempt for every sort of refinement.” For Burns she is said to have cherished a “heartfelt devotion,” but she “acknowledged he had broken no promise to her.” Burns’s mother, with whom, on account of her activity and honest independence, she was a great favourite, wished her son to marry her; but his uncle and aunts advised him against it, believing that her faults would soon have “disgusted him,” and this was apparently the bard’s own opinion,—indeed, there is no evidence of any deep affection on his part, al-

though he makes mention approvingly of her "person, grace, and merit."

The "pitiful taking" in which Burns, some time before the birth of the child in November 1784, found himself to be, coupled with the depressing influences of his father's death and the wearying monotony of the continual struggle with misfortunes, led to a recurrence of his hypochondriac melancholy, which found vent in certain extremely penitential verses, modelled partly on Young, Shenstone, and other exponents of "sensibility" and partly on the metrical liturgy of the Kirk, the principal piece being "Stanzas in the Prospect of Death," in which, notwithstanding his penitential depression, he experimented in the Spenserian stanza—borrowed by him from Beattie and Shenstone, and afterwards employed for "The Cotter's Saturday Night." But his brooding and foreboding mood lasted but a short time. In two separate pieces, a "Reply" and an "Epistle,"—sent by him to "rough, rude, ready-witted Rankine," a neighbouring farmer with whom he had struck up a congenial intimacy,—he deals with his predicament in the scoffing and broadly humorous fashion affected in similar circumstances by his fellow-peasants; though in his humour there is also a polished scorn and a command of the niceties of technical slang far beyond their rough attainments in wit. Apparently it never occurred to him that those

two very different moods required excuse or explanation, for he included, without any attempt at further enlightenment, both the "Epistle" and the "Stanzas" in the Kilmarnock edition of his poems.

The violent change of mood—which became more permanent in its character than the other—was due to the interference of the kirk-session, whose authority Burns did not really admit, although he dared not, in view of the almost absolute control exercised by the Kirk in regard to marriage questions, defy it.<sup>1</sup> Among the peasantry of Scotland there was also a special resentment at the discipline of the "cutty stool"—a resentment which is voiced in many of the popular lyrics, as well as in chapbook productions both in prose and verse. One cause of it was the distinction made between "poor folk" and those possessing "siller," the latter being allowed to escape the shame of the public exhibition on payment of a considerable sum for behoof of the poor. Unable to rid themselves of their grievance, the peasants therefore pretended

<sup>1</sup> A pretty good, though not quite adequate, notion of the boundless pretensions of the Kirk in regard to the marriages of all parishioners, whether they recognised its authority or not, may be obtained by the perusal of the chapter on the subject in Edgar's *Old Church Life in Scotland*, 2nd series, 1886, pp. 134-201.



to make light of it, accepting it very much in the character of a huge joke, the laughter at which was merely to be withheld until they had left the sacred building, or at least not longer than the duration of the sacred day, during which laughter of any kind was deemed hardly permissible. Such offences were, besides, regarded as in themselves very light ones. Primitive notions of love, like those enshrined in the old ballads, still survived amongst them in almost their original simplicity. Their constant familiarity with the processes of animal life rendered them less amenable to the teaching of convention, or the ordinances of a more refined civilisation. Those aspects also of the Christian faith which had given birth to monasticism, and to a modified form of it in certain doctrines of the Presbyterian Kirk, had failed to take any deep root in the hearts of those children of Nature, who, although recognising—perhaps even more deeply than those of higher station—the obligations and benefits of family ties, looked with a tolerant eye on preliminary slips from “virtue.”

Proud of his paternity, and moved by the strong natural emotions of the situation, Burns, on being introduced to the infant (which was brought up by his mother), celebrated “the first instance that entitled him to the venerable

appellation of 'father' by penning the defiant "Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter," which, while pervaded by a humorous scorn of a more boisterous, if less objectionable, kind than his "Epistle," exhibits a tender and generous solicitude towards the child that was plainly quite heartfelt. The piece is also noticeable for the marked advance it exhibits in his poetic art. Here his pre-eminent gift of satire, blended with graphic—and sometimes sympathetic—humour, reveals for the first time its peculiar idiosyncrasy. The three pieces relating to this incident—the "Reply," the "Epistle," and the "Welcome"—are likewise the earliest specimens of his verse in the six-line stave in *rime coulé* which was henceforth to be specially associated with his name. They also mark his definite adoption of the rôle of Scottish vernacular bard. Hitherto he had confined himself mainly to lyrics modelled in a miscellaneous fashion on those in the Collections—Scots, Anglo-Scots, and English—and to various lugubrious and sentimental pieces, inspired partly by the poetry of "sensibility," partly by his own inward wretchedness, and partly by youthful affectation; but now, after he had almost given up rhyming, he met with Fergusson's *Poems*, which made him string anew his "wildly sounding lyre with emulating vigour." The "vigour," as well as the "emulation," is indeed

quite manifest in the pieces mentioned. It was probably Fergusson who first gave Burns an adequate notion—by his admirable vernacular vocabulary and his clever sketches of the humorous incidents of humble life—of the special possibilities that were still latent in the Scottish vernacular Muse ; but the vigour was all Burns's own, and it was fully awakened by his experiences in connection with his humiliations at the hands of the kirk-session.



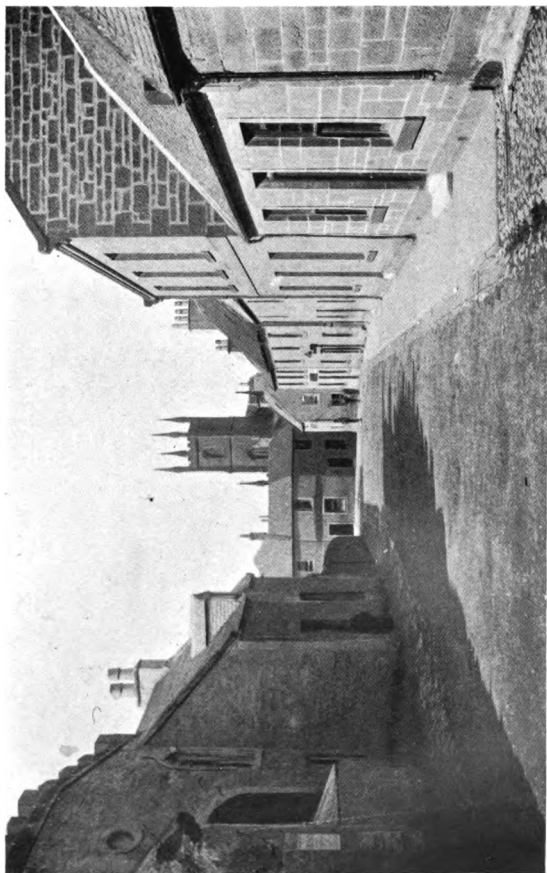
## CHAPTER IV

MOSSGIEL—1783-1786

Failure as Farmer—Consciousness of Genius—Poetic Hopes—Mauchline Young Men—Poetic Satires—Burns and the Kirk—His Religious Belief—Jean Armour—Chambers-Stevenson Fictions—The Unlucky “Paper”—The Kirk and Marriages—Mutilation of the Paper—Rage and Despair of Burns—Mary Campbell—A Bachelor’s Certificate—Emigration Resolves—In Hiding—Poetic Publications—The Kilmarnock Volume—Characteristics of his Verse.

THE affairs of William Burnes having become hopelessly muddled, and it being certain that he could not long survive, Robert and Gilbert, with the two eldest daughters, put in claims, as creditors, for wages due for several years back, and with the money were able to enter on a lease of the farm of Mossgiel, which was sublet to them by Gavin Hamilton, a lawyer in Mauchline. Between Hamilton and the poet a close intimacy soon sprung up, which developed





HIGH STREET, MAUCHLINE



into warm friendship. The farm was taken from Martinmas 1783, and the family removed to it in March of the following year, shortly after the father's death. It lies high, with treeless and bleak surroundings, but commanding extensive views stretching westwards to the sea, and rather diversified in character, though with no striking features, the monotony of the enclosed farm plots being broken by wooded glens and river valleys, with a horizon to the south, of the low rounded Cumnock hills. A mile to the south-east—and within easy reach of the poet of an evening—lies the village of Mauchline, whose kirkyard and taverns and other features, as well as its more conspicuous and some of its more obscure inhabitants, have attained permanent notability through the poet's verse; and which—though much rebuilding has taken place since the poet's day—is still the same old, dull, ugly, country clachan it was when he first set curious eyes upon it.

“I entered on this farm,” records Burns of Mossgiel in his Autobiography, “with a full resolution, ‘Come, go to, I will be wise!’ I read farming books, I calculated crops, I attended markets; and, in short, in spite of the devil, the world, and the flesh, I believe I should have been a wise man; but the first year, from unfortunately buying in bad seed, the second, from a late

harvest, we lost half of both our crops. This overset all my wisdom, and I returned 'like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.'"

For his lack of farming success at Mossiel Burns was thus at first in no way to blame; but his interest in his employment was, all along, mainly that which necessity enforces. Only very special encouragement could have made it more; and it so happened that his hopes of success in it were never radiant. Handicapped as he was by lack of capital, all that for many years he could look forward to was a repetition of the old hard struggle for bare subsistence. It would thus be by no means difficult to "overset all his wisdom"; and it seems to have been, at least in part, "overset" before the second recurrence of a bad harvest. In his rhyming epistles to Lapraik, in the spring of 1785, not only does he repeat his old contempt for the "sordid sons of Mammon," and express the hope that—

"Tho' here they scrape, an' squeeze, an' growl,  
Their worthless nievefu' of a soul  
May in some future carcase howl  
The forest's fright";

but he advises those whom "social pleasure charms," etc., to "come to his bowl, come to

his arms," as his "friends" and "brothers." Indeed, had there not been a growing discontent with his lot, it is hard to conceive how a second, merely accidental, misfortune could have so completely put the copestone on his discouragement that he again became "abandoned of view or aim in life," so far as farming was concerned, and reverted, in part at least, to the old proudly miserable and shamly happy mood revealed in his eulogy of the "Men of Pleasure." It is also, on the face of it, unlikely—even to the verge of impossibility—that two good harvests could have so turned the scale as to have made him settle down into a *douce*, steady-going agriculturalist. Such early good fortune might have made him in several ways less reckless; and it is even probable that had his prosperity been such as to have warranted him at this time contracting marriage with Jean Armour, by whom his "heart" had been "caught" soon after he came to Mossiel, his love adventures would have been less exciting and manifold, and his life less chequered by misfortune; but the real difficulty was the desires and ambitions which were part and parcel of his remarkable personality. Simmering with a tumult of sentiments and hopes of a totally different order from those created by "reading farming books" and "calculating crops," and capable of "all the towering

of genius," he could hardly have found a congenial sphere of endeavour merely in a milder form of the old monotonous drudgery. The hand of fate was upon him, and, for weal or woe, he was bound to follow whither it pointed the way. From the time that he had become possessed of Fergusson's *Poems*—and this seems to have been shortly after he removed to Mossgiel—he had evidently become inspired by a fuller consciousness of a poetic genius of his own, and with a brighter hope that he also

"For poor auld Scotland's sake  
Some useful plan or book might make."

To this hope he gave very detailed expression in his First Common-Place Book. "However I am pleased," so he writes, "with the works of our Scotch poets, particularly the excellent Ramsay and the still more excellent Fergusson, yet I am hurt to see other places of Scotland, their towns, rivers, woods, haughs, etc., immortalised in such celebrated performances, whilst my dear native country, the ancient baileries of Carrick, Kyle, and Cunningham, famous both in ancient and modern times for a gallant and warlike race of inhabitants; a country where civil and particularly religious liberty have ever found their first support and their last asylum; a country, the birthplace of many

philosophers, soldiers, and statesmen, and the scene of many important events recorded in Scottish history, particularly a great many of the actions of the glorious Wallace, the saviour of his country: yet we have never had one Scotch poet of any eminence to make the fertile banks of Irvine, the romantic woodlands and sequestered scenes of Aire, and the heathy mountainous source and winding sweep of Doon, emulate Tay, Forth, Ettrick, Tweed, etc. This is a complaint I would gladly remedy, but, alas! I am far unequal to the task, both in native genius and education.

“Obscure I am and obscure I must be, though no young poet nor young soldier’s heart ever beat more fondly for fame than mine.”

In his poetical epistle to William Simson, May 1785, containing several stanzas of surpassing beauty, he expresses his aspirations very much to the above effect, but in a spirit of far greater resolve and hopefulness. His *Common-Place Book* reflections on the subject end with this quotation—

“And if there is no other scene of Being  
Where my insatiate wish may have its fill;  
This something at my heart that heaves for room,  
My best, my dearest part, was made in vain.”

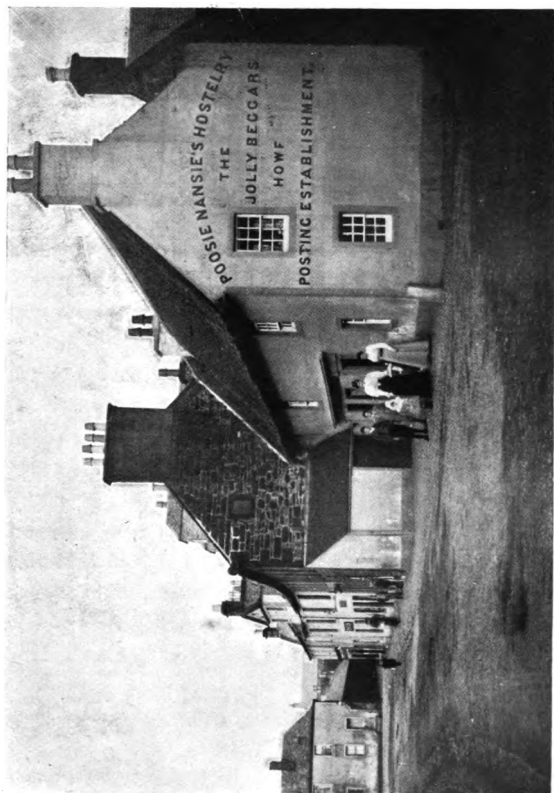
The “something” at his “heart” clearly produced within him a strong unrest that tended to



emphasise the irksomeness of his dull round of toil, and to reinforce his indifference to his immediate worldly interests. In the neighbouring Mauchline he had also constant facilities for sociality, though they were hardly of the kind most likely to promote the refinement of his tastes, or the higher discipline of his genius. By the clever young men of the village—and especially those of a boldly inquisitive turn of mind—he was welcomed as their chief guide, philosopher, and friend. Of necessity the scene of their sociality was the public-house; and with Burns, as he puts it, “in the midst of them,” we can easily conceive how the minutes must have

“Wing’d their way wi’ pleasure.”

At the same time, the talk was probably more intoxicating than the liquor, for their potations were necessarily regulated by their limited command of pocket-money. Gilbert also assures us that even at Mossgiel his brother’s “temperance and frugality were everything that could be wished,” his expenses being confined to his £7 of yearly allowance. He tells us also that he does not recollect, “till towards the end of his becoming author (when his growing celebrity occasioned his being often in company), to have ever seen him intoxicated.” This would be towards the spring of 1786, and the conviviality



POOSIE NANSIE'S AND MAIN STREET, NAUCHLINE



referred to may have been partly that in the houses of his richer acquaintances,—deep drinking on social occasions being then, amongst those who could afford it, an almost universal custom.

But superficially unpromising though his environment was for the development and display of his poetic gift, he was able not only to vanquish his untoward circumstances, but to turn them to peculiar poetic account. In the humours of rustic convivialities and recreations, in the scenes and incidents of rustic labour, or in the banalities of ecclesiastical tyranny, disputes and oratory, he discovered opportunities for triumphs in graphic vernacular verse eclipsing the achievements of any predecessor. Among the earliest of his more remarkable pieces was that suggested by the grotesque vanity of a country schoolmaster, who, having to eke out his scanty salary, established a small grocery where he sold a few medicines, thought fit, in a conversation with the bard, to air, rather boastingly, his medical equipment. At once he was immortalised in "Death and Doctor Hornbook," less notable even for the keenness of its personal satire than for its amusingly realistic exposition of the physical and mental characteristics of an inebriated countryman, and its eerie yet surpassingly droll picture of the terrible *something* whose name was "Death."

But it was from his satires on ecclesiastical escapades that Burns, in a district where ecclesiastical matters, whether as a grievance or a joy, were the most engrossing topics of general interest, won his earliest fame. "The first," writes Burns in his Autobiography, "of my poetic offspring that saw the light" [probably merely by private circulation] "was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two reverend Calvinists, both of them *dramatis personæ* in my 'Holy Fair.' I had an idea myself that the piece had some merits; but, to prevent the worst, I gave a copy of it to a friend who was very fond of these things, and told him I could not guess who was the author of it, but that I thought it pretty clever. With a certain side of both clergy and laity it met with a roar of applause." The piece referred to was "The Twa Herds," and the clergymen satirised were Moodie of Riccarton, thus pictured in "The Holy Fair"—

"Should Hornie, as in ancient days,  
'Mang sons o' God present him,  
The vera sight o' Moodie's face  
To 's ain het hame had sent him  
Wi' fright that day,"

and "black" Russell, whose frightsome roaring was even more terrible than the "stampin'" and

“jumpin’” of the dramatic Moodie. The quarrel was merely about parish boundaries; but having irritated each other to desperation in their private discussions of this very paltry matter, they determined to exhibit themselves before the Presbytery. “There in the open court,” writes Lockhart, who obtained special information on the subject, “to which the announcement of the discussion had drawn a multitude of the country people, Burns among the rest, the reverend divines, hitherto sworn friends and associates, lost all command of temper and abused each other *coram populo*, with a fiery virulence of personal invective such as has long been banished from all popular assemblies, wherever the laws of courtesy are enforced by those of a certain unwritten code.” By those versed in all the circumstances of the quarrel, as well as in the idiosyncrasies of the two disputants and their brother Presbyters, and in the warm and even exciting patronage disputes of the period, the piece would be appreciated with a relish of a keener kind than it possesses for modern readers. It is too steeped in local allusions, and too much concerned with matters of transient interest, to permit us fully to discern all its point and cleverness; but the real gist of the joke is, in one stanza, expressed with a felicitous condensation that enables us

almost to hear the chuckling of the New-Light partisans—

“Sic twa—O, do I live to see ’t?—  
Sic famous twa sud disagreeet,  
An’ names like ‘villain,’ ‘hypocrite,’  
Ilk ither gi’en,  
While New-Light herds, wi’ laughin’ spite,  
Say neither ’s liein’!”

h “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” which, he says, “next made its appearance,” is, however, of quite a different order of excellence. Intended to celebrate the victory of his friend and landlord, Gavin Hamilton, over the Mauchline kirk-session in their attempts to exercise kirk discipline on him for neglect of ordinances, violation of the Sabbath, and other supposed ecclesiastical irregularities, it assumes the form of a representation of the devotions of William Fisher—the leading church elder in Mauchline—on learning he had lost his process. Yet though suggested by a merely local scandal, and depicting merely the supposed sentiments of a very densely bigoted and dully hypocritical peasant farmer, the local and transient in it is of very little account. As a merciless exposure of the immoral absurdities of Calvinism, and a satiric picture—finished to perfection in every minute detail—of a typical pharisaic Calvinist, it will, in almost every line and phrase, receive a full meed of admiration and

assent so long as this type of religionist survives. The satire was probably penned in July 1785, and is therefore of considerably earlier date than the more subtle, as also more variedly and picturesquely humorous, portrait of the Devil of Presbyterian superstition, in the "Address to the De'il," which dates about the beginning of 1786. All those satires are in Burns's favourite *rime couéé*; but in "The Holy Fair," written a month or two after "Holy Willie," a more elaborate stave is for the first time adopted—that modified form of the old "Christis Kirk" stave (consisting of the ballad octave with a refrain) used by Ramsay and Fergusson. Though suggested by the "Leith Races" and "Hallow Fair" of Fergusson, and partly modelled as regards its opening stanzas on the former poem, it is altogether a record of personal observation; and in minute delicacy of humorous discernment, compact felicity of phrase, variety and vividness of colouring, and deadly accuracy of satire, leaves Fergusson far behind. While a faithfully exact picture of a certain sacramental occasion in Mauchline churchyard over a century ago, such is its fine truthfulness to nature, so selective its choice of the essential humours of the scene, and so convincing its exhibition of certain perennial human vagaries, that to an intelligent reader of the present day it is even more illuminating



than it probably would be to most of the poet's local admirers. Two other ecclesiastical satires—"The Ordination," in the same stanza, and "The Kirk's Alarm," modelled on a popular English stave—are, compared with "Holy Willie" and "The Holy Fair," of but second-class merit, most of their allusions being too minutely local and of too passing an interest to be now fully appreciated.

The question has been mooted—What was the poet's religious attitude and motive in his satires? Some maintain that he was actuated by a high sense of religious duty; others, as Mr. Graham in his *Scottish Men of Letters*, are of opinion that there is not "in them *saeva indignatio* at evils he hated, but wild humour over scandals he laughed at"; and a third class—not now very numerous—regard them as mere exhibitions of wicked irreverence. That a sense of religious duty was his only or main motive, can—though loudly and insistently proclaimed by certain enthusiasts—hardly commend itself to those well versed in his character and career. Religious duty—in the conventional sense of that term—was never a predominant influence in his life; and he was governed more by impulse than by definite rule. But whilst amongst his primary incentives must have been his extraordinary interest in his fellow-creatures, and the pleasure he experienced in the exercise of his wonderful

art, he was no doubt also impelled to write as he did by a burning and invincible love of truth and reality. Whether this comprehended all his religion, or whether it can properly be termed a religion, it undoubtedly implied a *sæva indignatio* not merely at every sort of hypocritical pretence, but at all forms of doctrine, especially those of Calvinism, which he felt in his soul to be a libel on the universe and on the "Divinity"—whatever that might be—"which shapes our ends." Who can doubt, for example, his *sæva indignatio* at "holy Willie" and his creed, or his contemptuous scorn of "wee Miller," who "raibled" orthodoxy merely because he "wanted a manse," or his innate disgust at the oratorical antics of Moodie, with "lengthened chin" and "turned up snout," or his genuine antipathy to hangman-hearted Russell, with his gloating proclamations of the tortures of hell fire? That the satires are irreverent towards much of the current ecclesiasticism, and many of the ecclesiastical teachers, of his time is very manifest; but popular ecclesiasticism may not have a very essential connection with religion, however closely it may seem to be associated with it. In any case, it is evident (apart from scattered references in various pieces) from "The Cotter's Saturday Night," notwithstanding a certain artificial and bombastic taint, that Burns, about the time he was

penning his keenest satires, had a deep respect for the humblest religionist whose belief was sincere and whose practice corresponded with his profession.

As for his own religious belief, it varied a good deal with his moods; and it underwent a gradual change towards greater vagueness and uncertainty as he more realised the depth of the mystery that enshrouds both life and death. Before he became famous he was accustomed, as we have seen, to puzzle the Calvinism of his fellow-churchgoers; but he left the consideration of the higher questions of religious belief alone. To his friend James Candlish he wrote from Edinburgh, 21st March 1787, that like him he had "ventured in the daring path Spinoza trod," but that "experience of the weakness not the strength of human powers" made him "glad to grasp at revealed religion." Here he was perhaps mainly echoing the sentiments of the learned divines of Edinburgh; and how long he continued in this frame of mind it is impossible to tell, for in the expression of his opinions to strangers he was a good deal influenced by the characteristics of his correspondents. Very little, of course, can be inferred from his professions to Clarinda. To her he went so far as to concede the opinion that the Supreme Being had placed the administration of all things relating to man's future destiny into

the hands of Jesus Christ—"a great personage whose relation to Him we cannot comprehend"; but having conceded so much, he told her that his creed was "pretty nearly expressed in the last clause of James Dean's grace, an honest weaver in Ayrshire: 'Lord, grant that we may lead a gude life!—for a gude life makes a gude end; at least, it helps weel.'" The opinions he expressed to Mrs. Dunlop regarding Jesus Christ were somewhat similar; but they were modified occasionally by various qualifications, as well as by expressions of doubt and uncertainty; and in a letter of 9th July 1790 he defines his position thus: "Though I have no objection to what the Christian system tells us of another world, yet I own I am partial to those proofs and ideas of it which we have wrought out of our own heads and hearts." But writing to Alexander Cunningham on February of the same year he is much less reticent: "If there be any truth in the orthodox faith of these Churches," he declares, "I am damned past redemption, and what is worse, damned to all eternity. I am deeply read in Boston's *Fourfold State*, Marshall's *On Sanctification*, Guthrie's *Trial of Saving Interest*, etc., but 'there is no balm in Gilead, there is no physician there' for me. . . . All my fears and cares are of this world: if there is another, an honest man has nothing to fear from it. I hate a man that wishes to be a

deist ; but I fear every fair, unprejudiced inquirer must in some degree be a sceptic. It is not that there are any staggering arguments against the immortality of man, but, like electricity, phlogiston, etc., the subject is so involved in darkness, that we want data to go upon." Thus if Burns did not, like Carlyle and Stevenson, formally reject the supernatural in Christianity as a delusion, he was unable to reckon very much upon its possibly being true.

When "Holy Willie's Prayer" made its appearance, it, writes Burns, "alarmed the kirk-session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane rhymers. Unhappily for me, my idle wandering led me, on another side, pointblank within reach of their heaviest metal. This is the unfortunate story alluded to in my printed poem, 'The Lament.' 'Twas a shocking affair, which I cannot bear yet to recollect, and it had very nearly given me one or two of the principal qualifications for a place amongst those who have lost the chart, and mistaken the reckoning, of rationality." The "shocking affair" was the sequel to his courtship of Jean Armour ; and since this courtship had a vital relation to his whole future, it is necessary to touch upon it with a certain particularity.

R. L. Stevenson—mainly inspired by Robert

Chambers—in an early essay on Burns, denounced the courtship as a merely frivolous diversion on the part of both, neither being really in love with the other. “This facile and empty-headed girl had,” he asserted, “nothing more in view than a flirtation; and her heart from the first, and on to the end of the story, was engaged by another man.” As for Burns, according to Stevenson, he was merely obeying his peculiar code of honour as a “professional Don Juan,” which forbade him to refuse the “empty-headed girl’s” thoughtless challenge. But for neither of those co-related pictures of frivolity is there sufficient justification. The Chambers story of Armour’s other, and only, lover rests on the idle gossip of Burns’s sister Isabella. True, a letter of Burns indicates the existence of another “Barkis” who was “willing,” but the whole character of Armour’s long-continued relations with Burns is sufficient proof that Burns, though without the consent of the parents, was the favoured lover. Then the unauthenticated Chambers-Stevenson version of the commencement of the courtship, at the washing-green, is demonstrably a mere myth. It represents Armour as there casting down the glove, by asking one, to whom she had never previously addressed a syllable, whether he had yet got any one to love him as well as his dog did; whereas, according to her own story to

Hately Waddell, Burns then jocularly remonstrated with her for driving his dog from the washing-green, and to his sally she made no reply. At this time Burns did not even know her name; and he first asked a friend to introduce her to him, on learning of her reputation as a singer of Scottish songs. Nor is there the slightest indication that in this case he had, as Stevenson supposes, to "batter himself into an affection." It seems to have sprung up spontaneously; and not only so, but during the two years that the courtship lasted she was the "presiding deity," even apparently to the exclusion of passing fancies for other mistresses, for he himself records his case thus—

"When first I came to Stewart Kyle,  
My mind it was na steady;  
Where'er I gaed, where'er I rade,  
A mistress still I had ay.

But when I cam roun' by Mauchline toun,  
Not dreading anybody,  
My heart was caught before I thought,  
And by a Mauchline lady."

While, also, in another piece, extolling the "fineness," the "divineness," the "wit," the "brawnness," and the "beauty" respectively of other five Mauchline belles, he ends with—

"But Armour's the jewel for me o' them a'."

The allusions to her in "The Vision" and the "Address to the De'il" are to the same effect, and in his "Epistle to Davie" he celebrates his love to her in a strain of rapture to which he never attained in the case of any of his other love-heroines—

"Ye hae your Meg, your dearest part,  
And I my darling Jean!  
It warms me, it charms me,  
To mention but her name;  
It heats me, it beets me,  
And sets me a' on flame!"

And he proceeds to give utterance to a prayer on her behalf, somewhat highly pitched and excessive in tone, but at least demonstrating that he regarded himself as her pledged lover. True, about this time he wrote an exquisite lyric to Mary Morison; but her, quite above him in station, he only worshipped from afar; and his verses were in as strict a sense a merely artistic tribute as the embodiment of womanly charms by a sculptor or painter.

On learning that Armour was with child to him, of which he became aware in February 1786, Burns gave vent to his momentary feelings of perturbation in a letter to his friend, James Smith, of which, unfortunately, only a small fragment has been preserved. It runs thus—

"... Against two things I am fixed as fate—



staying at home, and owning her conjugally. The first, by Heaven, I will not do ; the last, by hell, I will never do ! A good God bless you, and make you happy, up to the warmest weeping wish of parting friendship. . . .

“ If you see Jean, tell her I will meet her, so help me God in my hour of need.”

This incoherent scrap has been interpreted to imply that whatever affection Burns may at one time have had for Armour, was now all but extinct ; but can anything so definite be inferred from a merely fragmentary exclamation, unilluminated by any context ? Moreover, Burns and his young associates made a show of entertaining views of their own in regard to matrimony. In Burns's case they may have been partly created by his desperate worldly circumstances, and his lack of an aim in life ; and at this very crisis his affairs happened to be at such a pass that marriage with Armour might, at first sight, seem a sheer impossibility. That even with prospects so hopeless he, at the interview, not only promised her marriage, but gave her a “ paper ” which, according to Scots law, made him and her man and wife, is surely evidence of affection. For, be it observed, nothing more than a merely verbal promise, which her father might confirm by interview, would, in ordinary circumstances, be necessary to allay apprehensions. But Burns

went the length of, what he supposed to be, there and then deciding the matter finally both for her and him, by forestalling the possible opposition of her parents and the kirk-session. "I determined," so he wrote, albeit perhaps in a spirit of ironic exaggeration, to John Arnot, "to take my measures with such thought and forethought, such caution and precaution, that all the malignant planets of the hemisphere should be unable to blight my designs." We may even conclude that the "paper" was either antedated or expressed in such a fashion as to save the reputation of both him and her, as well as to remove the conventional stigma from the child about to be born. Such expedients were by no means unknown in those days of the "cutty stool," much to the disturbance of kirk-session regulations. Nor, although the kirk-sessions professed to regard all kind of irregular—i.e. non-ecclesiastical—marriages as a violation of Kirk authority, were they entitled, after 1690, to interfere, unless the parties, for greater security or in order to enjoy the privilege of church membership, desired its ecclesiastical confirmation, when all the discipline that could be enforced was a rebuke for the irregular marriage—if even this merely futile manifestation of authority was permissible. But some kirk-sessions—and Mauchline was one—claimed to go beyond this. An irregular marriage

of any kind was, in the eyes of Auld, the minister of Mauchline, no marriage at all; he denied the validity not merely of marriages by means of an attested agreement, but even of marriages solemnised by non-Established clergymen, whether Episcopalians or Presbyterian dissenters. Further, the position of the Kirk of Scotland was—and on this point the Mauchline kirk-session always stretched their prerogative to the utmost—that it lay with the kirk-session to decide whether the parties desiring marriage were entitled to that privilege. The refusal of banns was expressly enjoined not merely to those under scandal, or to those under age, or to those who, not being under age, had not the full consent of their parents, but to all who were grossly ignorant or neglected the ordinances, public or private, of the Kirk's religion.

This being so, Armour's father most likely consulted Auld about the "paper." The kirk-session had begun to inquire about the case before the "paper" was destroyed, and Auld probably had private interviews with the father, although they are not mentioned in the kirk-session records. In any case, Auld, sooner or later, must have heard of the story, for Burns himself made no secret of it; but both spoke and wrote his mind about it to all and sundry. But, even apart from any paper, it was clearly

Auld's duty, in ordinary circumstances, to have advocated with Armour's parents the marriage of the parties, since they were both willing to make one another "honest." Apparently, therefore, Auld had an insuperable objection to the marriage; and that objection must have been based on the irreverent heterodoxy of Burns, as manifested in "Holy Willie's Prayer," about which the session had for some time been very sorely exercised.

But the father—either before or after he had reported to Auld—consulted Robert Aiken, who, according to information obtained by Burns, mutilated or destroyed the "paper"—probably on the 16th April. Though he was a warm friend and admirer of Burns, it was of course his duty to do the best he could for his client. If the daughter consented to give it up, its mutilation was perhaps permissible; and Aiken may have supposed that Burns, on learning of its destruction, would regard the incident as closed. Aiken may even have flattered himself that he was doing Burns a service in assisting to end a connection that might hamper his future; for he had already some notion of the rare poetic gifts of this too fermentive peasant.

Of the tumultuous effect on Burns of his wife's faint-heartedness we have a vivid picture in his letter to Arnot. This sample may suffice: "My

chained faculties broke loose; my maddening passions, roused to tenfold fury, bore over their banks with impetuous, resistless force, carrying every check and principle before them. Counsel was an unheeded call to the passing hurricane; Reason a screaming elk in the vortex of Mosköestrom; and Religion a feebly-struggling beaver down the roarings of Niagara. I reprobated the first moment of my existence; execrated Adam's folly-infatuated wish for the goodly-looking but poison-breathing gift which had ruined him and undone me; and called on the womb of uncreated night to close over me and all my sorrows.

"A storm naturally overblows itself. My spent passions gradually sank into a lurid calm; and by degrees I have subsided into the time-settled sorrow of the sable widower, who, wiping away the decent tear, lifts up his grief-worn eye to look—for another wife."

Some have proposed to explain the extraordinary nature of his mental distress by the mere shock to his egotism, and of course in every love disappointment the shock to the egotism counts for a good deal; but to shock the egotism of Burns to the degree that it was shocked, the operation of a very strong previous affection was required. His egotism, it may be granted, was peculiarly great. Pride inveterate, and even



inordinate, though restrained by sympathetic generosity, was a fundamental element of his complex character. Without it he could not have been the compelling personality that he was. An offence to his pride therefore cut him to the quick, and here it had been grossly outraged. The circumstances of his rejection by Armour were even more bitterly mortifying than those of his rejection by Elison Begbie. But all this being granted, the depth and soreness of his wound would depend on the strength of his attachment. Nor is sufficient warrant for doubting its strength to be found in its seeming oblivion, when he had suddenly to face the unpleasant consequences of the courtship. A merely temporary submergence of affection proves nothing, for as Alice remarks in Fletcher's play, *Monsieur Thomas*—

“Young wenche's loves  
Are like the course of quartern, they may stop  
And seem to cease sometimes, and yet we see  
The least distemper puts 'em back again,  
And seats 'em in their old course.”

That her “false-heartedness,” as he terms it, should have only increased his pain at requiring to give her up, only shows that his love had become seated again in its old course more firmly than ever. But false-heartedness could not have rekindled to violent warmth a love

either previously slight or that had all but perished. No doubt, to be rejected by her parents and the parish minister was also in some degree a rebuff to his self-esteem; but on this possibility he had counted, and in itself it must have affected him little. Even the fact that by her rejection of him he was now brought within the range of the Kirk's heaviest metal, cannot account for the depth of his chagrin. Though all those circumstances must have tended to aggravate his torment, they could not of themselves have created it.

But Burns's sense of injury being such as it was, the part played by Auld in the matter—the fact that, so far from advising reconciliation, he was, if not at the beginning at least at the end, a party to the pretended annihilation of the marriage (since he promised to give Burns a certificate as a bachelor),—cannot have strengthened the poet's respect for the Kirk's morality in matrimonial matters. In Burns's own words, the whole procedure in the pretended annihilating process was a “shocking affair”; and that it should for some time have exercised an unsettling influence on his character was inevitable.

One of the immediate consequences of the destruction of the “paper” was his endeavour to alleviate his pain by the distraction of another

love entanglement ; and for this he found a young woman ready, it would appear, at a moment's notice to fall in with his wishes. She was Mary Campbell, a girl of Highland descent, the daughter of a Clyde sailor. She had been for some time in Ayrshire, and during the previous year was a nursery-maid in the family of Gavin Hamilton. Neither of two theories—mooted in the supposed interest of the bard's fair fame—that the "Highland Lassie" and "Highland Mary" of the songs was a mere poetic fancy, or that the songs refer to another Highland girl than Mary Campbell from the Clyde, is worth consideration ; for that, in any case, he was the sworn lover of the Clyde Mary Campbell cannot be gainsaid. Nor is the attempt to remove the date of the courtship back to 1784 less absurdly gratuitous. According to Burns, the "Highland Lassie," for whom he proposed to "dare the billows roar," etc., was "a warm-hearted, charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love." "After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment, we met," so he writes, "by appointment on the second Sunday of May in a sequestered spot by the banks of Ayr, where we spent the day in taking farewell, before she should embark for the West Highlands to arrange matters for our projected change of life. At the close of the autumn following she



crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock, where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days, before I could even hear of her illness." The day of farewell with her is commemorated in the song "Highland Mary," and her death is mourned in the celebrated lament, "Thou Lingerin Star," written so late as November 1789. In recording the events of his life, Burns deals in a very haphazard way with details; but in reference to Mary Campbell, he had perhaps special reasons for avoiding accuracy. To preserve its romantic interest for strangers, variations both by way of omission and commission were advisable. Thus he is silent as to its exact period, and is discreetly oblivious of the immediately antecedent Armour episode, contenting himself, when he sent "Highland Mary" to Thomson, with the remark that "the subject of the song is one of the most interesting passages of my youthful days." Then, as we have seen, he affirmed that she parted from him in May in order to arrange "for our projected change of life," which, if the Bible preserved in the monument at Ayr belonged to Mary Campbell, she probably did, though in what way she was to prepare, it is impossible to tell. He himself omits to say whether, if immediate marriage was at first intended, he afterwards

changed his mind or not; or whether he intended to take her with him to the West Indies and marry her there, or leave her, married or unmarried, in this country, on the understanding that she should afterwards join him; or in what way, if at all, he intended to set up house. All these matters are still a profound mystery. The most feasible supposition is that he rashly promised to take her with him to the Indies—though this is contradicted by references in his verses to a solitary voyage;—that, expecting to leave during the summer, he allowed or persuaded her to give up her situation to that end, but after frequent delays failed to meet her at Greenock as he had arranged; and that while vainly waiting for him, she was taken ill and died—perhaps under the impression that he had designedly failed to keep his tryst.

But no theory we can form of his story is quite feasible, or consistent with what we otherwise know of his sentiments and conduct; and still more inexplicable than his story of their intentions is his reference to “a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment”; for if it was a “long tract,” then he must have been ardently devoted to her when he gave the “paper” to Armour. But if this had been the case, the destruction of the “paper” could not have caused such a pang of disappointment; and

since "long" is qualified by "pretty," we may legitimately infer that the reciprocal attachment did not, at least on Burns's part, become ardent until the "paper" was destroyed, and that on his part also the "ardour" was largely a mere variety of the emotional excitement caused by Armour's rejection of him.<sup>1</sup> Discovering that Mary Campbell—who could hardly have failed to know all about the Armour story, even if she did not learn it from the lips of Burns—was prepared, though he was barely off with the old love, to "dare the ocean wave" either with him or whenever he should send for her, he became her pledged lover within less than a month of the destruction of the "paper." It was rapid work for one who was by no means certain that he was not the husband of another; and if any proof were needed of its heedlessness, it is supplied by his own letter to David Brice, 12th June 1786, describing his amazing condition of mind when taking steps to have "another wife," and the utter futility of the Campbell entanglement to restore his mental composure: "I still love her [Armour] to distraction after all, though I won't tell her so if I see her, which I

<sup>1</sup> In Munro's *Burns and Highland Mary* there are rîgmâroles about a long course of courtship, but the stories, on the face of them, are largely of the "cock-and-bull" order.



don't want to do. . . . I have tried often to forget her; I have run into all kinds of dissipation and riot, mason-meetings, drinking-matches, and other mischief" [including his engagement to Mary Campbell], "to drive her out of my head, but all in vain."

Plainly, a resolution to have another wife, come to in such amazing haste and when his faculties were in such an astonishing state of upheaval, was—though quite in accordance with certain promptings of human nature—not likely to have had, if fully gratified, a supremely happy result. The Campbell attachment had really no independent existence of its own. It was created mainly by the need to salve his wounded pride, and to stifle the anguish of his intolerable longing for Armour. As for Mary Campbell, nothing definite is known of her character and disposition, apart from the poet's references and what the episode itself suggests. Amiable she may have been, extremely passionate and emotional she almost certainly was. That she was completely dominated by the personality of Burns is evident; and, even in such peculiar circumstances, this is neither surprising nor discreditable, but it reveals little as to the real qualities of her mind and heart. Her mad devotion—which in such circumstances he could not possibly have deserved—was what at this bitter crisis specially com-

mended her to him ; and for the comfort of such strong affection—all the more that his reciprocation of it, complete though at the time it seemed to be, was merely delusive—he was bound to cherish her memory with a peculiar fondness, largely compounded though the fondness always was of gratitude, and unpleasantly mingled though it came to be with remorse. The fondness is more particularly expressed in the song “Highland Mary,” and remorse as well as fondness finds utterance in “Thou Lingering Star,”—the former song portraying his feelings when under the spell of the imaginary attachment, and the latter the regrets that in his memory were associated with it ; but they afford no warrant for the canonisation of this love-stricken Highland girl as a very paragon—indeed a wholly unnatural paragon—of womanhood.

At one time Burns proposed to avoid censure by the kirk-session. Membership of the Kirk was not a privilege he coveted ; and its discipline he regarded with scorn, though in those days of ecclesiastical tyranny external conformity could not always be avoided. There were also peculiarities in his present quandary which at last induced him to deem conformity advisable. To Brice, at an early stage of the affair, he wrote : “As I am an old fox, I shall give them” [the

kirk-session] "dodging and doubling for it, and by and by I intend to earth among the mountains of Jamaica." But—partly it may be in connection with his pledge to Mary Campbell—he apparently became uneasy as to the legal effect of the unlucky "paper," mutilated though it was stated to have been; for although Jean had given it up, and had declined meanwhile to acknowledge him as husband, it did not follow that he was not her husband in the eye of the law. To Richmond he, however, wrote—after an interview with Jean, who did not "show that penitence that might have been expected"—  
"the priest, I am informed, will give me a certificate as a single man, if I comply with the rules of the Church, which for this very reason I intend to do." He also wrote to Brice on 17th July that he was influenced merely by a wish to get a certificate as a bachelor, which Auld had promised him. Those who were under scandal were, according to the enactments of the Kirk, ineligible for marriage until purged from it; but, on Burns submitting to rebuke, Auld, as a matter of course, was bound, with or without promise, to grant him a certificate that he had been purged from it, should he demand such certificate. The certificate mentioned by Burns must therefore have referred to something more than this. It implied that the whole story of the unlucky

"paper" had been communicated to Auld, and that Auld, knowing this, was prepared to certify that Burns was an unmarried man. From the context of the letter to Richmond, we may even infer that the Armours informed Burns, on his just complaint to them of the position in which he was placed, that Auld was willing, on his submitting to discipline, to grant him a bachelor's certificate. Burns submitted, and no doubt got the certificate, whatever may have been its legal value; but he considered that Armour's rejection of him as her husband absolved him from all moral obligations to support the offspring that might be born. Accordingly, in view of his intentions to set out for Jamaica, he executed a writ resigning all his goods and the prospective profit on his poems in trust for his illegitimate child by Elizabeth Paton, legal intimation of the assignment being made at the "mercat cross of Ayr." This led the Armours to get a warrant to put him in prison until he should find security for a certain sum; but obtaining word of their intention, "by a channel they little dreamt of," he went into hiding in Kilmarnock. The "channel" was doubtless "the poor ill-advised girl," whom he asks Richmond, for his sake, to regard charitably, adding, "may all the pains that rend the injured, enraged lover's bosom haunt her mother to her latest hour!"

This last invective was, however, mainly rhetoric, for he considerably informs Richmond that he was writing "in a moment of rage."

But in the very thick of his worldly perplexities, and of the dissipation and riot by which he was endeavouring to forget his matrimonial sorrows, Burns was intently occupied in preparations for poetic publication. Encouraged by the "roar of applause" with which his ecclesiastical satires had been received in certain circles, as well as by the growing consciousness of mastery in his art, he had, during the winter of 1785-86, been cultivating the muses with augmenting enthusiasm, and with a success, everything considered, well nigh unprecedented. Those six months at least almost equal—it might be plausibly argued that they surpass—in the intrinsic importance of their poetic productiveness, the whole remainder of his life. To this wonderful period belong such unique masterpieces as "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Jolly Beggars," "Halloween," "The Address to the De'il," "The Holy Fair," and "The Auld Farmer's Salutation," and such notable achievements as "The Vision," "The Cotter's Saturday Night," "To a Louse," "To a Mouse," "The Epistle to James Smith," "Scotch Drink," "The Earnest Cry and Prayer," "The Twa Dogs," and "Poor Mailie's Elegy," not to mention many



more or less, but still of great, distinction ; so that would it be easy to name any six months in the career of another poet which have been more surprisingly fruitful, if variety as well as quality and quantity be considered? And even immediately before going to press, and during the process of printing, the rate of production continued unabated, although most of those later pieces are tainted more or less by a lugubriousness due to the acuteness of his temporary unhappiness.

Such rapid and strenuous production suggests that from the autumn of 1785 he had begun to prepare pieces with a special view to publication ; and that, as he proceeded, his desire became quickened not merely by the fame acquired through Aiken's private recitals of his verse, but by the prospects of soon leaving Scotland for the West Indies. The "shocking affair" of his refusal by Armour greatly reinforced his motives for emigrating, and thus rendered more urgent his desire for a little ready money ; but he was moved to attempt immediate publication largely by the proudly pathetic wish to leave with his friends and fellow-countrymen something which would enable them to hold his memory in esteem. "Before leaving my native country," so he wrote in his Autobiography, "I resolved to publish my poems. I weighed my productions as impartially as was in my power ; I thought they had merit ; and 'twas a



delicious idea that I should be called a clever fellow, even tho' it should never reach my ears—a poor negro-driver, or perhaps gone to the world of spirits, a victim to that inhospitable clime. I can truly say, that, *pauvre inconnu* as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and my works as I have at this moment. . . . I was pretty sure my poems would meet with some applause; but at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would drown the voice of censure, and the novelty of West Indian scenes would make me forget neglect."

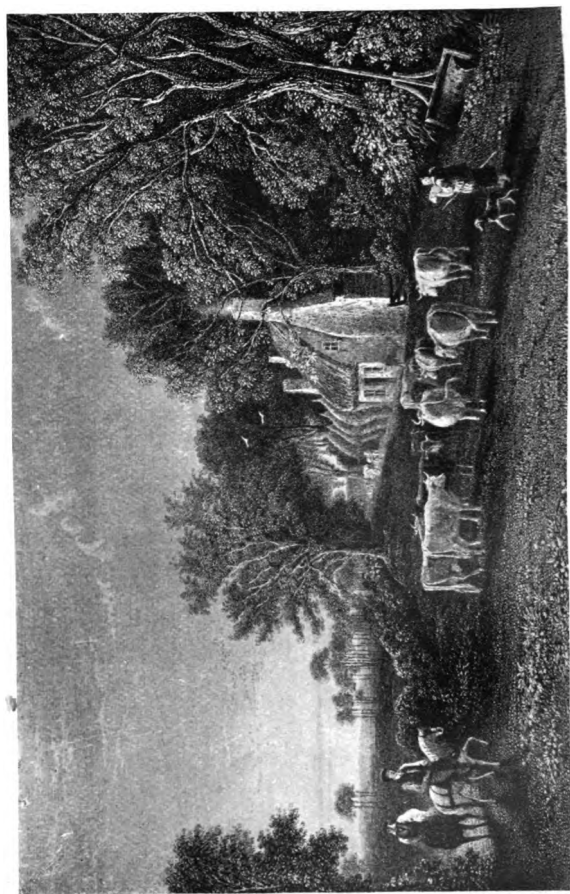
Proposals for publication by subscription appeared on the 16th April, and as soon as three hundred subscriptions were received, the book was sent to press, an edition of six hundred copies being printed off. The volume, printed at Kilmarnock by John Wilson, appeared on the 20th July with this anonymous device on the title-page—

"The simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art,  
He pours the wild effusions of the heart;  
And if inspired, 'tis Nature's pow'rs inspire:  
Hers all the melting thrill, and hers the kindling fire."

Within little more than a month the whole six hundred copies were subscribed—the circulation of the book being confined mainly to Ayrshire, where, according to Heron, it was received with

delight and even transport by "old and young, high and low, grave and gay, learned and ignorant."

That nearly all Ayrshire should have at once surrendered to his magic spell is not surprising, for he was the "inspired bard" of the Ayrshire muse, and it was of the scenes, customs, incidents, and characters of Ayrshire that he more particularly sung. Also much of the method of thought and cast of sentiment, as well as the manner of expression—though stamped with his individual genius—was idiomatically that of Ayrshire. The characteristic features of their own environment, local and social, portrayed with such vividness and charm by one of themselves, could hardly fail to prove of irresistible interest to all but the dullest. Some, or perhaps many, were, it is true, bound to be perplexed or repelled by his more daring satires—the most daring he did not publish—and his unceremonious treatment of many current maxims, religious and social. Perhaps not a few, then as now, failed to discern in his verse any antidote to the narrowing and saddening influences of their traditional creed notions; but some of those too dolorous persons would no doubt discover a sort of dreary comfort in the more hypochondriacal pieces of his earlier years, and in the shadowy outline of fading conventional beliefs which still glimmered here and there in



MOSSGIEL

*From the engraving of the picture by D. O. Hill in Blackie's "Land of Burns," 1844*



his later verses, contrasting piquantly with stanzas almost frankly pagan, or mockingly scornful of ecclesiastical pretence, or brimful of wild gaiety and humour, or glowing with the warmth of amorous passion. But only those exceptionally stupid or soulless, or enslaved by the artificialities of a heartless or worldly creed, could resist the influences of poetry so strongly human, and appealing so directly to the general heart of mankind; for Burns, be it remembered, addressed the common people as one of themselves. His standpoint—except in his artificial strivings to ape the eighteenth-century English poets—was very much that of the mere peasant. He wrote of that in which even the humblest was interested, and he so wrote that all could so sufficiently understand as to appreciate and admire, though not necessarily with just discrimination. He glorified to them their own everyday life, and their own common things, and their own sentiments and aspirations. It was mainly here that he found his true poetic vocation. By reason of the very greatness of his genius he was bound to be intensely true to himself; and comprehensive and soaring though his genius was, his most hallowed memories and his chief experiences, bitter and joyous alike, were those of a peasant. His knowledge and love of Nature had come to him by virtue of his peasanthood; his sympathy with

animal life was fostered by his avocations ; and his interest in his fellow-men, even of the outcast class, had been acquired by mingling with them on terms of comradeship. But while socially a peasant, his training as a poetic artist—limited though in certain aspects it was—had been in a manner unique ; for while thoroughly versed by minute and careful study in the vernacular poetic tradition, so far as it then survived, and specially qualified by virtue of the simplicity of his peasant life, to appreciate that tradition, his gift of expression, preserving though it did its original vernacular raciness, had been disciplined and enriched by his familiarity with many of the best specimens of English verse. Thus though the effort to rival English models as a rule “gravelled him to death,” he yet acquired a poetic diction of a directness, exactness, vividness, and force unequalled by any poetic contemporary.

## CHAPTER V

### EDINBURGH, AND SCOTTISH TOURS

—1787-1788

Reluctance to Emigrate—Feelings of a Father—A Secret Wretchedness—"The Gloomy Night"—Death of Mary Campbell—Proposed Second Edition of Poems—Sets out for Edinburgh—Reception on the Way—Arrival—Impressions—Patrons—The Crochallan Club—"The Brothers of the Mystic Tie"—Personal Influence—Subscriptions for the New Volume—Arrangement with Creech—Publication—Southern Tour—At Mauchline—Tour in the West Highlands—Northern Tour—Love Adventures—Mrs. Maclehose.

**M**EANWHILE Burns, having obtained the unenviable post of book-keeper on a Jamaica estate, had completed arrangements for emigrating, and proposed to sail on the brigantine *Nancy*, advertised to leave Greenock on the 10th August. But for some reason its departure was delayed, and this induced his employers to propose that he should sail by a ship which on 1st September was to sail direct to the port of



destination. Whether, or how, the proposal fell through there is no information ; but he was still in Ayrshire when—to his unfeigned delight—news reached him on the 3rd that Armour had been delivered of twins, a boy and a girl. An arrangement was come to by which the boy should be brought up at Mossgiel, and the girl by the mother's friends at Mauchline. The occurrence increased his reluctance to emigrate, and some of his friends had thoughts of getting him a situation on the excise, though on the 8th he wrote to Robert Muir, that he believed that "all hopes of staying at home will be abortive." On the 26th he informed his cousin at Montrose that his time of leaving was uncertain, but he did not think it would be "till after harvest." But plainly he was now more than ever anxious to remain in Scotland, if at all possible.

A few months ago merely an obscure and indigent peasant farmer, and the almost ridiculous butt of an unsavoury village scandal, he was now acclaimed by almost universal assent as the poet-laureate of his native county. At last he had succeeded in something of importance ; and doubtless his preference now was to enjoy in his old surroundings the pleasures of his success, and to win more triumphs of a similar kind. Apparently in the hope that Robert Aiken might devise a means of assisting him to tide over his present difficulty,

he informed him, early in October, that he had been endeavouring to persuade Wilson to print a second edition, which Wilson had declined to do unless the printing expenses were guaranteed. In the same letter he stated that he was induced to stay at home mainly by "the feelings of a father," which in his "present mood" "overbalanced everything that could be laid in the scale against it." This is easily credible. The memory of his own father's efforts on his children's behalf was an inspiring example to him; but he hardly needed such an incentive, for his interest in his children was one of his most marked characteristics. Yet reluctant as he was to emigrate, for this and other cardinal reasons, he hints at a secret wretchedness, and at something he had lately seen of "a storm of mischief thickening over" his "folly-devoted head," which might render it impossible for him "to remain in this country, or accept the kind offers of his friends." This mysterious allusion can hardly have been to aught else than his entanglement with Mary Campbell. Whatever may have been its precise nature, its dominating influence over his fortunes was such that, while it lasted, it turned the scale of his resolution, so as to compel him at last, entirely against his own inclinations, to despatch his chest "on the way to Greenock," with the intention of shortly following it. Having

to convey it so far on the road, he composed, going or returning, "The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast," much of the imagery being suggested by the approach, on the moors through which he was travelling, of a tempestuous evening. The feelings to which the song gives utterance are typically those of every peasant on bidding farewell to the land of his birth, but with the addition of regrets peculiar to his own hard case; and moreover, the poetic sensibility which enabled him to achieve this vivid record of his emotions necessarily added to their pungency.

Some time afterwards—it is uncertain when—Burns, influenced by a letter of Dr. Blacklock to Mr. Lawrie, minister of Newmilns, recommending the publication of a new edition, not only determined to remain in Scotland, but resolved, if possible, to have the edition published in Edinburgh. But as late as 30th October—if we are to believe his poetical "Epistle to Major Logan"—he was still contemplating his voyage to the Indies; and it may be that, Dr. Blacklock's letter notwithstanding, he would have persisted in his resolution, but that "the storm of mischief," which had threatened him from the direction of the Clyde, was dispersed by the news—necessarily deeply distressing, but bringing the inexpressible relief of deliverance from his dilemma—of the death of Mary Campbell. With her death the

urgent reasons for his departure were removed ; he was again a free man with his destiny in his own hands, and a future before him brightened by the hopes of still further poetic renown. Dr. Blacklock's letter had roused his "poetic ambition." "The Doctor," so in his Autobiography he writes, with a deferential modesty which may have been partly feigned, but which is now a little piquant—"The Doctor belonged to a class of critics for whose applause I had not even dared to hope. His idea, that I would meet with encouragement for a second edition, fired me so much, that away I posted for Edinburgh, without a single acquaintance in town, or a single letter of recommendation in my pocket. The baneful star that had so long presided in my zenith for once made a revolution to the nadir ; and the providential care of a good God placed me under the patronage of one of His noblest creatures, the Earl of Glencairn. *Oubliez moi, grand Dieu, si jamais je l'oublie !*"

Burns's story of his rapid resolve must not be accepted literally. He did not act so hurriedly as he seems to imply. Some time before leaving, he had commissioned Robert Aiken, to whom Blacklock's letter had been shown, to make inquiries as to the chances of an Edinburgh edition ; for on 20th November he writes to John Ballantyne : "I hear of no returns from Edinburgh

to Mr. Aiken respecting my second edition business, so I am thinking to set out, beginning of next week, for the City myself." Set out accordingly he did, and though he did not carry introductions with him, he knew that recommendations had been forwarded on his behalf. Still, the adventure was a little speculative, and he could ill afford its failure. His command of ready money was small; and farmer though he was, or had been, he had to borrow a pony to convey him—with such dignity as befitted the bard of Ayrshire—on his momentous journey to the capital. But the enthusiasm with which he was greeted by his fellow-farmers on the way thither testified to his already widening reputation, and must have greatly confirmed his hopes of substantial success. His journey developed into almost a kind of triumphal procession. At Covington Mains, where he had arranged to stay the first night, all the farmers of the parish were invited to a banquet in his honour; on the morrow a huge party met him at breakfast at the next farmhouse; and at midday he found a similar reception at the Bank, in the parish of Carnwath. But Edinburgh itself was of course not at all stirred as he entered it. Passing in the evening down its dimly lit avenues of tall houses, the burly countryman, having stabled his pony, proceeded to the dingy and disreputable Baxter's



Close in the Lawnmarket, where he took up his quarters with his old Mauchline friend Richmond, the two for the joint occupancy paying a weekly rent of three shillings. Rather upset by the festivities and excitements on the way, he kept his bed all next day; and having no immediate opportunity of opening negotiations about his proposed volume, he spent the next few days in exploring the city, which, besides its novel sights and historic memories, was endeared to him by its association with his father's early life, and with the careers of his poetic predecessors Ramsay and Fergusson.

Of his impressions of Edinburgh, Burns has left what may be termed an official record, intended specially for the eyes of his patrons, in the rather formal verses of "The Address," of which the most poetic stanza is that describing the castle (a conspicuous object before him for many miles as he approached the city from the west)—

"There, watching high the least alarms,  
Thy rough, rude fortress gleams afar," etc.

Holyrood—to which he rather flatteringly alludes as that "noble, stately dome"—appealed almost equally to his historic imagination; it was "with awestruck thought and pitying tears" that he viewed this "ancient home" of the exiled Stuarts; for, poetically at least, he was ever a

Jacobite. He likewise pays due tribute to the "elegance and splendour" of what, in those days, was the amazingly plain architecture of "Scotia's darling seat"; compliments the city on its wealth, which has never been its strong point; and its busy trade, for which even yet it is by no means celebrated; and does fit obeisance to it as the seat of Justice, and the abode of Learning and Science. Nor does he forget to make mention of the kindness, sociality, and liberal-mindedness of its sons, nor to celebrate the beauty of its daughters, "gay as the gilded summer sky"; but all—except for a graceful tribute to "fair Burnet"—is very general, and his most interesting and confidential sentiments are left unuttered.

In Edinburgh he began, on 9th April, to "take down remarks on the spot" regarding his experiences and the characters he "met with"; but this, his Second Common-Place Book, remains merely a meagre and tantalising fragment; though it includes discerning appreciations of Glencairn, Professor Stewart, the publisher Creech, and Dr. Blair; and affords a partial glimpse of his attitude towards the Edinburgh dignitaries. Perhaps too much has been made of the fact, that he was not unduly elated by admission to the circles of rank and fashion; that the recognition of his genius by so many exalted and learned personages did not turn his head, or entice him towards Utopian



dreams about his future. Persons of the calibre of Burns can hardly be spoiled by laudation: laudation rarely does them proper or adequate justice. They suffer more from the lack of sufficiently enlightened appreciation; and if Edinburgh erred in laudation, it was rather by way of inadequacy than excess. Incidental remarks, both in his Common-Place Book and in various letters, show that, so far from being either overawed or flattered by the nature of his reception, he was, if anything, disappointed. "There are few of the sore evils under the sun," so he confidentially remarks to himself, "give me more uneasiness and chagrin than the comparison how a man of genius, nay, of avowed worth, is received everywhere, with the reception which a mere ordinary character, decorated with the trappings and futile distinctions of fortune, meets." And he gives this example of his meaning: Glencairn "showed so much attention, engrossing attention, one day, to the only blockhead at table (the whole company consisted of his lordship, dunderpate, and myself), that I was within half a point of throwing down my gage of contemptuous defiance; but he shook my hand and looked so benevolently good at parting," etc. He has also something similar about Dr. Blair, but with him he was more at his ease. Though he did not respect him with "humble veneration," his heart



overflowed with "liking" to the Doctor, when the Doctor met him "on equal ground in conversation"; but when the Doctor neglected him for the "mere carcase of greatness," or the Doctor's eye measured the difference of their "points of elevation," Burns said to himself, "with scarcely any emotion, 'what do I care for him or his pomp either?'"

Much of this sense of occasional neglect may be explained by his rustic training and his narrow experience of the world. It was really impossible for him to regard mere social distinctions as of much account, and insistence on them only provoked his resentment. As Gilbert relates, he had "always a particular jealousy of people who were richer than himself, or who had more consequence in life." Had he been only a common-place rustic, he would have been properly overawed by such distinctions. Had he been an aristocrat, he might have been sympathetic enough towards those whom he would have regarded as his social inferiors; yet his pride, innate and inveterate as his genius, would have been no whit less pronounced, though it might have been a source to him rather of comfort than of pain. But as a rustic of marvellous ability and great personal ascendancy—though ground down by poverty and humiliated by hopeless toil—he was naturally disposed to scoff at the pretensions of

common-place personages, who deemed themselves socially his betters. What chiefly galled him in his Edinburgh intercourse was the inability to be on terms of equal friendship with his benefactors. They permitted him to discern that between him and them there was a social gulf fixed, which his genius could not bridge over. They were polite, cordial, encouraging, benevolent, but condescending. As he himself recognised, much of the special notice he attracted was owing to "the meteor-like novelty of his appearance," and it could not be expected to last. "I have formed many intimacies and friendships here," he writes to Dr. Moore, "but I am afraid they are all of too tender a construction to bear carriage a hundred and fifty miles." This was almost inevitable—inevitable on account of his very exceptional case. He was only, meanwhile, in a kind of enchanted palace which would soon dissolve, and things would again be with him very much as they had ever been. Already he was, to a great extent, the victim of his hard and sordid past. It had taken such large possession of him that, notwithstanding his genius, it was really to be the "master of his fate." His temporary success, brilliant though it appeared to be, had, as matters turned out, no essential influence in changing his lot; and instead of averting, it tended rather to accelerate, its tragedy. Most of

his benefactors, as he surmised, though he only hints at his opinion, had but a faint idea of the rare honour they were doing themselves by kindly entertaining him. This also was inevitable; for how could they conceive that so great a poet as Burns is now recognised to have been could come out of Mossiel! It did not occur to them that they were more deeply in his debt than he was in theirs; or that such verses as he supplied them with the privilege of purchasing were, if the expression may be pardoned, "dirt-cheap" at the paltry price of five shillings a volume. The Edinburgh generation of Burns's day was in truth not blinder than most Edinburgh, and other, generations; and it was not so blind towards his genius as the immediately preceding one had been towards the genius of Fergusson, over whose grave it was left for Burns to erect a tombstone—a tombstone which, in this city of statues to all sorts of local celebrities, is still, strange to say, his only memorial.

One cause of the lack of adequate recognition both of Fergusson and Burns was, that, while their best work was in the vernacular, the learned classes were at this time doing their utmost to forget Scotch and master English. Vernacular verse was of course quite what one might expect from a rustic; but after all, it was merely rustic verse. That of Burns was exceptionally good of

its kind—so good that learned and fashionable Edinburgh, notwithstanding its artificial predilections, was faintly conscious of its superior merit; but it could hardly see its way to rank it with the high-class productions of contemporary English poets. And there was something to be said for this opinion. The genius of Burns was in some respects fettered by his peculiar circumstances: by the medium he had chosen for its expression, and by the lack of complete technical training. Yet the superbness of his triumphs, by means of such unpretentious methods, was but imperfectly recognised. As a poetic rustic, he was of course deemed a very remarkable prodigy; but his patrons did not dream that he was the greatest British poet of his time. Still, by the gentry he was welcomed as warmly and treated as kindly as any merely rustic poet could hope to be, and the more genial and clever amongst them—such as the sprightly and unconventional Duchess of Gordon—were charmed, and occasionally entranced, by his ingenuous and ardent eloquence. The learned luminaries—mostly of the professorial class, and all a little hidebound and artificial in their tastes—were occasionally startled, and not always agreeably, by his uncompromising, if modest, expression of his own opinions, whether they harmonised or not with accepted canons; but they patronised

him, on the whole, with the best of goodwill, their estimate of his genius being probably very much that indicated in a letter of "Jupiter" Carlyle to the Duchess of Buccleugh. "Nothing in the literary world," he writes, "has occupied Edinburgh for some weeks past so much as the poems of Robert Burns, an illiterate ploughman of Ayrshire. His poems are, many of them, extremely good" [though, of course, not to be named with that clerical masterpiece, 'The Douglas' of the immortal John Home] "both those in Scots dialect and in English. He is thought to be equal if not superior to Ramsay in original genius and humour" [Only fancy!]. "I am not certain of that, but he surpasses him in sensibility." He also regretfully adds that he hears Burns "has not been so advisable as to suppress some things that he was advised to suppress."<sup>1</sup>

So much for the rustic bard in the saloons of fashion and learning. In the gatherings of the strictly burgher class, among whom traditions of Fergusson and even Ramsay still lingered, he was socially much more in his element; and in the company of the clever, jovial, and rudely witty spirits of the Crochallan Club he found at least relief from the strain of formal propriety. His

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the MS. by Mr. Graham in his *Scottish Men of Letters*, p. 400.

evenings there were a sort of *edition de luxe* of the old convivial nights in Tarbolton and Mauchline. In "the midst" of the Crochallan worthies, he was neither irritated by the condescension of social superiors, nor hampered by the niggling formalities of convention. All were on a footing of equality; or if superiority was recognised, it was decided solely by the clash of wits. Appreciation of him as a poet might not be of the highest kind, and the friendship of which he was the recipient might smack a little too much of mere boon companionship; but the appreciation was warm and sincere, and as for boon companionship, this was one of the bard's strong points. His contests in the rough wit and humour, which was a feature of the place, with his printer, the hard-headed, learned, and caustic Smellie, would be enjoyed by himself as much as by the company, whether he had the worst, as tradition says, of the encounter, or not. He himself describes Smellie as "a man positively of the best abilities and greatest strength of mind, as well as one of the best hearts and keenest wits," he had ever met with; and he was equally appreciative of William Dunbar, writer to the Signet, and colonel of the Crochallan corps, whom he refers to as "one of the worthiest fellows of the world," and out of compliment to whom he supplied to Johnson's *Musical*

*Museum* a new version of "Rattlin', Roarin' Willie."

The characteristic wit and humour of the Crochallan Club is now a thing of the past, but that it then flourished in intelligent and reputable society is undeniable. In the eighteenth century, and later, the standard of propriety in speech and literature was not, even in England, so strict as it is now; and in Scottish verse, and several grades of Scottish society, there was still greater freedom of expression. Thick-and-thin supporters of Burns do him no service by representing this phase of his wit either as a mere occasional lapse of his own, or as mainly the consequence of his contact with a group of eccentrics. If the eccentricity be a bad variety, the badness is less excusable, by virtue of its exceptional character and its lack of the sanction of custom. And if to assert that at any period of its history many in Scotland were addicted to this form of wit be a groundless libel on Scotland, then is Scotland saved at the expense of Burns and his Edinburgh friends, on whose devoted heads the blame, attached by the scandalised apologists to such a practice, necessarily becomes concentrated. Nor was the tendency of Burns to indulge in it created by the Crochallan intercourse. It may have received some impetus thereby; but even pieces included in the

Kilmarnock volume, as well as letters and unpublished verses of this early period, attest a peculiar mastery of the accomplishment. Smellie also, after his own fashion, was an adept at the prose variety of it, as even the faint specimens visible in certain portions of his printed letters sufficiently suggest; and Kerr, in his *Life of Smellie*, affirms that the letters of Burns to Smellie were inimitable, but all "quite unfit for publication." Indeed, the misrepresentations of fact indulged in by self-elected champions of Scotland and Burns, in regard to this particular matter, can be condoned only on the supposition of their nescience of what is perfectly well known, not merely to all very much versed in Burns MSS., but to all who know anything of old Scottish popular song—even in the partly expurgated versions of it, preserved in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany*. Nor is this all. We must suppose them innocent of almost any acquaintanceship with general Scottish poetry, from the verses even of the most renowned of the old "makaris" down to and including Allan Ramsay, many of whose published pieces far surpass in coarseness anything given to the world by Burns. In fact, the wit of the Crochallan Club, and of the earlier Pitcairne and Ramsay coteries, represented a very old Scottish tradition—a tradition of which the most remarkable specimens are those marvels of

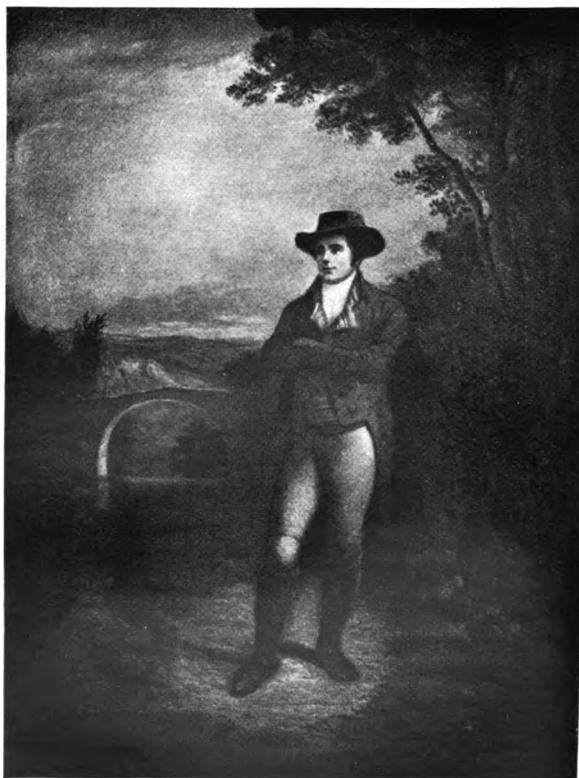


old-world slang, the poetic "flytings" of the "makaris," which enjoyed the special patronage of the Scottish kings.

By the "brothers of the mystic tie" in Edinburgh, Burns, himself a freemason of official rank, was received with special cordiality. At a special meeting of the St. Andrews Lodge, presided over by the grand master, the toast of "Caledonia, and Caledonia's Bard, Brother Burns," was received with acclamation. "As I had no idea," he writes, "such a thing would happen, I was downright thunderstruck, and, trembling in every nerve, made the best return in my power. Just as I had finished, some of the grand officers said so loud that I could hear, with a most comforting accent, 'Very well indeed!' which set me to rights again." Indeed, in no company where good-fellowship prevailed could Burns fail to enjoy himself; and notwithstanding slight symptoms of chagrin at certain aspects of his Edinburgh reception, it is very evident that his visit was one of the most gratifying and happy experiences of his chequered life.

The opportunity it afforded for intercourse with his fellows of all ranks, of so many degrees and varieties of ability, and of so many different grades of character, must have rendered every day of his stay in the Scottish capital brimful of interest. Nor is there any doubt that in what-





ROBERT BURNS

*From the picture by Alexander Nasmyth in the National Gallery, Edinburgh  
From the Centenary Burns, by permission of Messrs. T. C. and E. C. Jack*

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ever company he found himself he became a great social attraction. Dressed in the holiday attire of a farmer of the period—as shown in Nasmyth's full-length portrait—he was, in Edinburgh, rather “kenspeckle” wherever he went. Rather over middle height, and of strong and athletic build, though with something of a ploughman's stoop, of dark, yet of healthily ruddy, complexion, he had the advantage of a striking physical personality; and his conversation—in which the forceful directness of peasant speech was amended by the tactful guidance of genius, and of no small intellectual discipline—gained greatly in charm from the wonderful play of remarkable features, the eloquence of large and luminous eyes,<sup>1</sup> and the varied tones of a richly emotional voice.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Like coals of living fire.”—SYME.

<sup>2</sup> Scott's description, well known though it is, can hardly be altogether omitted in any extended biography of Burns: “I would have taken the poet, had I not known what he was, for a very sagacious country farmer of the old school; that is, none of your modern agriculturists who keep labourers for their drudgery, but the *douce guidman* who held his own plough. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments: the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a cast which glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time. His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption.”

Thus though Burns, both for his cordial reception in Edinburgh society and the extent of the subscription list for his new volume, was largely indebted to the efforts of influential patrons, the zeal with which the proposal was taken up must have been largely augmented by the impression produced by his personality. Very soon after the poet's arrival in Edinburgh, Mr. Dalrymple of Orangefield, near Ayr, introduced him to Lord Glencairn and Henry Erskine, "who," so he reports on 7th December to Gavin Hamilton, "have taken me under their wing." By Lord Glencairn's interest, the members of the Caledonian Hunt subscribed each a guinea for a copy of his volume. This special compliment Burns acknowledged by dedicating his volume to them. Presents of £10 from the Earl of Eglinton and Patrick Miller of Dalswinton supplied him with some welcome ready money; and he duly sent to them his "very grateful acknowledgment" for their munificence; but to those and other subscribers of more than five shillings he thought it incumbent on him, as would appear from a letter of Dr. Moore, to send the number of copies equivalent, at five shillings, to their subscription.

Creech, though approached by his old pupil Glencairn, appears to have had some hesitation in becoming sponsor for a volume, of which the

first edition had appeared in provincial Kilmarnock, but the speedy support of so many influential patrons must have disabused him of all fears of loss of dignity, by condescending to act as agent for the Ayrshire ploughman. Favourable notices, also, of the volume were being published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* (October, November, and December); and, much more gratifying to Burns, Henry Mackenzie, the author of his favourite *Man of Feeling*, reviewed it in December in Creech's own publication, *The Lounger*, pronouncing Burns a genius of no ordinary rank, and expressing his admiration of the "uncommon penetration and sagacity" with which this "heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners." He further referred to the worldly misfortunes which had suggested to the poet "the resolution of leaving his native land to seek under a West Indian clime the shelter and support which Scotland has denied him," and trusted he did his country "no more than justice when" he supposed "her ready to stretch out her hand to cherish and retain this native poet, whose 'wood-notes wild' possess so much excellence."

With such influential support, the pecuniary success of the poet's venture was bound to be considerable. It also exceeded the earlier ex-

pectations, for the poet on 22nd March 1787 wrote to Mrs Dunlop: "I have both a second and a third edition going on, as the second began with too small a number of copies. The whole I have printed is three thousand." In Edinburgh two separate impressions were printed, one known as the "skinking" and the other as the "stinking" edition, from the misprint of "skinking" in one of the impressions; but both impressions have the same title: "*Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, by Robert Burns. Edinburgh: printed for the author, and sold by William Creech, 1787." There is no hint that the volume is a second edition, but a supplementary issue printed in London from the "stinking" impression, with some additional errors, is entitled "The third edition. Printed for A. Strahan, T. Cadell in the Strand, and W. Creech, Edinburgh, 1787." The London edition may have been intended to dispose of the 500 copies for which Creech had subscribed. Ultimately—but at the cost of a long wrangle with Creech, which annihilated their friendship,—Burns was a gainer of something like £500. Whether Burns or Creech was more in the right, there is no evidence—except that Burns, though easily offended by any approach to sharp practice, was naturally generous; and that in the end Burns was the injured person rather than Creech. After subscribing for



500 copies, Creech purchased the copyright, for any subsequent editions, for £100. For such a proposal he is hardly to be blamed, and he may even have persuaded himself that he was acting generously in making it, for Burns was in need of the money; but by the arrangement Creech could not lose very much, and he might win a good deal. More than this, he was mean enough to accept—at the expense of a few presentation copies—of an additional fifty pages, including the immortal “Tam o’ Shanter,” for the edition of 1793; nor after this edition was sold did it enter his mind, even when arranging with Burns for a revision of the book for the edition of 1794, to send to Burns a tardy monetary recognition of the service he had done him in forwarding the verses, which Burns, in writing to him, had significantly alluded to “as much my own as the thumb-stall I have just now drawn on my finger, which I unfortunately gashed in mending my pen.”

In the 1787 edition the most notable additions were the weird and amazingly clever “Death and Doctor Hornbook,” written some two years previously; “The Brigs of Ayr,” written shortly before he left for Edinburgh, a dialogue piece in the heroic couplet, suggested probably by Fergusson’s “Planestanes and Causeway,” but influenced as to style and manner mainly by English models; the pungent “Address to the



Unco' Guid," an indirect remonstrance against the attitude of his more censorious neighbours towards the Jean Armour case, and concluding with an exhortation introduced by the fine couplet—

"Then gently scan your brother man,  
Still gentler sister woman";

"Tam Samson's Elegy," with its unsurpassably spirited portrait of a famous sportsman; "The Address to Edinburgh," already mentioned, the stately artificiality of which may perhaps be best discerned by comparing it with the humorous gusto of "The Address to the Haggis"; "The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast," and the irresistible "Green grow the Rashes, O."

The volume appeared on the 21st April; and as soon as he had completed arrangements for the distribution of copies, Burns prepared to bid farewell to Edinburgh. He preferred, however, to return to Ayrshire in a very circuitous fashion, and on 6th May set out along with Robert Ainslie, a young writer's apprentice, on a tour throughout the south of Scotland. The country was crossed in various directions—all the principal towns and many places of special interest being visited; after which he set out, by Alnwick, Warkworth, and Morpeth to Newcastle, whence he returned by Hexham, Carlisle, Dumfries, and

Sanquhar to Mossgiel, the whole journey occupying about a month. Of his travels he kept a diary, in which he jotted down very succinctly, but with admirable point, an account of the country generally, of the towns and other places of interest, of the various characters he encountered, and of the more amusing incidents. The picture he gives of rural Scotland, and of many of its typical inhabitants, a hundred years ago, is a very pleasant one. The great cordiality of his reception, wherever he went, put him on the best of terms with himself; and as, owing to his previously sequestered life, sightseeing had all the zest of novelty, the record of his impression of men and things, while of course that of a very shrewd observer, has the charm of a peculiar freshness and *naïvete*.

Before Burns left Mauchline, he was already, as we have seen, famous throughout his native Ayrshire; but when he now returned to it, it was with a reputation greatly enhanced; for the enthusiasm of Ayrshire had been confirmed by that of the rank and fashion and learning of Edinburgh, where he had been the "lion" of the season. When he set out for Edinburgh, he was also, notwithstanding the plaudits of Ayrshire, in very needy circumstances; but he came home in possession, for the first time in his life, of a good deal more than sufficed for his immediate wants,

and with the expectation of being shortly in the possession of a sum which, amongst those of his station, would be regarded as a little fortune. As a consequence of his altered circumstances, he was of course regarded with quite different eyes by his neighbours. Armour's parents became now as civil and conciliatory as they had hitherto been offensive; but, unhappily, in their eagerness to secure him as a son-in-law, they quite forgot discretion, and the sudden violent change in their policy provoked only his contempt. "If anything," he wrote, "had been wanting to disgust me completely at Armour's family, their mean compliance would have done it." It is further evident that, while the manifest delight of his own family circle gave him great pleasure, he did not particularly enjoy the local phase of his triumph. "I never, my friend," so he wrote to William Nicol of the Edinburgh High School, "thought mankind very capable of anything generous; but the stateliness of the patricians in Edinburgh, and the servility of my plebeian brethren (who perhaps formerly eyed me askance) since I returned home, have nearly put me out of conceit altogether with my species." Mere crawling servility towards himself was odious to him, for the same reason that made it impossible for him to adopt it towards others,—he deemed such an assumption of grovelling

humility unworthy of a human being. But of course he would readily distinguish between this and sincerely cordial expressions of pleasure at his success, which would not be altogether awanting. There were also other causes of his discomfort than the unpleasant servility of his old acquaintances. One of the chief must have been the revival of irksome and humiliating associations. He was again in contact with the old, dreary, sordid circumstances, to escape from which he had been so long struggling in vain. The early question of an "aim in life" was yet unsolved, and his experiences in Edinburgh, gratifying though they were, made it more puzzling than ever. "I cannot," he writes to his friend James Smith, "settle to my mind. Farming—the only thing of which I know anything, and Heaven above knows but little do I understand even of that—I cannot, dare not, risk, for farms as they are. If I do not fix, I will go for Jamaica. Should I stay in an unsettled state at home, I would only dissipate my little fortune, and ruin what I intend shall compensate my little ones for the stigma I have brought on their names." In short, his wish would have been, if possible, to sever himself from his whole past life and start afresh; and this partly from the foreboding conviction that in his old environment, and with no adequate aim, his future was bound

to be very much a repetition of his past. Thus he wrote despairingly to Nicol: "'Tis true, I have just now a little cash; but I am afraid the star that hitherto has shed its malignant, purpose-blasting rays full in my zenith; that noxious planet, so baneful in its influence to the rhyming tribe—I much dread it is not yet beneath my horizon. Misfortune dodges the path of human life; the poetic mind finds itself miserably deranged in, and unfit for the walks of business; add to all, that thoughtless follies and hare-brained whims, like so many *ignes fatui*, eternally diverging from the right line of sober discretion, sparkle with step-bewitching blaze in the idly-gazing eyes of the poor heedless bard, till, pop, 'he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again.' God grant this may be an unreal picture with respect to me! But should it not, I have very little dependence on mankind."

But his present stay in Ayrshire was short, for towards the close of June he set out on a tour in the West Highlands. The first that is heard of him is at Inveraray, where he inscribed the epigram with the famous couplet—

"There's naething here but Highland pride,  
And Highland scab and hunger."

How he reached the capital of the Argyll country we have no information; but his silence as to the

earlier portion of his route suggests that one reason for his tour was a desire to visit the relatives of Mary Campbell. He returned by way of Dumbarton, Glasgow, and Paisley. He had intended, immediately after his return, to set out to Edinburgh, with a view of winding up affairs with Creech, but had to delay appearing there on account of an accident, thus described in a letter to Richmond. "I have lately been rambling over by Dumbarton and Inveraray, and running a drunken race on the side of Loch Lomond with a wild Highlandman; his horse, which had never known the ornaments of iron or leather, zig-zagged across before my old spavin'd hunter, whose name is Jenny Geddes, and down came the Highlandman, horse and all, and down came Jenny and my bardship; so I have got such a skinful of bruises and wounds, that I shall be at least four weeks before I dare venture on my journey to Edinburgh." When he reached Edinburgh in about four weeks, he found that no immediate settlement was to be got from Creech, "who," he afterwards wrote, "kept me hanging on about Edinburgh from the 7th of August until the 13th of April 1788."

To relieve the irksomeness of waiting, Burns wisely resolved to set out on a tour to the north of Scotland, but not so wisely chose as his companion, William Nicol, a master in the High

School, with whom he was then staying. Burns's predilection for this clever but eccentric person is easily explained—apart from the convivial habits of both. Though of an almost ungovernable temper, and quick to take offence at even the mere shadow of an injustice, Nicol was generous and warm-hearted, and, being what is termed a “character,” his “originality of humour,” as Burns himself states, gave him “much entertainment.” On 25th August—as soon as Nicol got his holidays—they set out together in a post-chaise by way of Linlithgow, Falkirk, and Stirling. Though Burns's notes of this journey are even more condensed than those of the southern tour, they record some interesting incidents. “What a poor pimping business,” he writes after visiting Linlithgow, “is a Presbyterian place of worship: dirty, narrow, and squalid, stuck in a corner of old popish grandeur such as Linlithgow, and much more Melrose!” At Falkirk he “knelt at the tomb of Sir John Graham, the gallant friend of the immortal Wallace”; and after passing Bannockburn “said a fervent prayer for old Caledonia over the hole in a blue whinstone, where Robert de Bruce fixed his royal standard.” While delighted with the glorious prospect from the battlements of Stirling Castle, the sight of the ruined palace prompted an indiscreet Jacobite inscription on a window of the inn where he

stayed the night—partly inspired probably by his potatoes. At Harvieston, on the Devon, he spent a pleasant time with relations of Gavin Hamilton, and thence proceeded to Crieff. Influenced, it may be, by the sage counsels of his Edinburgh friends, he made various attempts during his tour to practise English verse, the subjects of his experiments being various features of the scenery; but, though incidental allusions to aspects of Nature are one of the special charms of his poetry, he had little of the painter's vision for scenery; and being thus handicapped in two ways, he merely achieved a few stilted failures. On the other hand, "The Birks of Aberfeldy," modelled on an old ballad, has at least the merit of unaffected simplicity. Near Birnam, he met at breakfast the famous Scottish fiddler, Neil Gow—"short, stout-built, honest Highland figure, with his greyish hair shed on his honest social brow," etc.; and at Blair he was entertained with great kindness by the Duke of Atholl, the ladies being so desirous that he should prolong his stay that it is said they endeavoured to bribe the driver to loosen a shoe of the horses. From Inverness he turned eastwards by Culloden, Nairn, Forres, and Elgin. At Gordon Castle he was received with much cordiality by the Duke and Duchess of Gordon; but the jealous indignation of Nicol, at not obtaining an immediate invitation to join the ducal



circle, compelled him to cut short the visit with great abruptness. The southward journey was by Aberdeen and his ancestral Kincardineshire ; but his " references to this district and to his intercourse with his relatives are very fragmentary. Proceeding by Dundee, the Carse of Gowrie, Perth and Kinross, he reached Edinburgh on 16th September, " after a tour of twenty-two days, and travelling near six hundred miles, windings included." Creech still gave no signs of disbursing ; and Burns, though afraid it would be " a tedious business," determined not to leave Edinburgh finally until a settlement was arrived at. The tedium of waiting was, however, broken by a second visit to Harvieston, followed by a short stay with Ramsay of Ochertyre, where, he wrote to Nicol, he found himself " very comfortable," " neither oppressed by ceremony nor mortified by neglect." Regarding Burns, Ramsay afterwards wrote to Currie : " I have been in the company of many men of genius, some of them poets, but never witnessed such flashes of intellectual brightness as from him—the impulse of the moment, sparks of celestial fire ! I never was more delighted, therefore, than with his company for two days' *tête-à-tête*. In a mixed company I should have made little of him, for, in the punster's phrase, he did not always know when to play off and when to play on."

On returning to Edinburgh he found Creech as procrastinating as ever. For Burns the delay was doubly unfortunate: it prevented him arranging definitely for his future, and it kept him dangling on in idleness and discontent in Edinburgh. Moreover, the Armour matter was again disturbing him. The death of Mary Campbell had removed a serious obstruction to the acknowledgment of his marriage to Armour; and now both she and her parents were more than willing to recognise the validity of the "paper." Relations had actually been renewed between him and her; but though his old love subsisted, he had by no means got over the offence to his self-esteem; and his weak submission to his passion was meantime to him a source rather of misery than satisfaction. From other love entanglements he was meanwhile comparatively free, although since he first left Mossgiel he had been as usual concerned in many adventures of varying degrees of seriousness. At one time he professed to have some thoughts of persuading a Midlothian farmer's daughter to accompany him to Ayrshire; and in Edinburgh his associations with a servant led, in August 1787, to the issue of a *fugæ* warrant against him. There were also a number of transient flirtations, including one with a lady, or lady's maid, of his native Ayrshire. To this

he refers in a letter to Smith, 30th June 1787, in which, while lamenting that his heart "no more glows with feverish rapture," that he has no "paradisaical evening interviews," etc., he makes mention, in a disagreeably contemptuous fashion, of some one with "a fine figure and elegant manners," who "in the train of some great folks, whom you know, had seen the politest quarters of Europe," but who he, when she had taken offence at his "talking of friendship in rather ambiguous terms," had "brought from her aërial towerings pop down" at his "foot like Corporal Trim's hat,"—all of which may merely mean that he managed rather dexterously to cover his retreat from an untenable position. Some have boldly conjectured that the lady may have been Margaret Chalmers, the stepniece of Gavin Hamilton; but she never could have acted in the way Burns described, nor could he have ventured to write to her in the tone of a letter addressed to his "Dear country-woman." The poet Campbell, indeed, asserts that Miss Chalmers—then Mrs. Hay—informed him that Burns had offered her marriage; but that he ever did so is quite inconsistent with the character of all his published letters to her, which, while revealing a very pleasant side of his character, indicate the existence between them of perfect and unclouded friendship, but



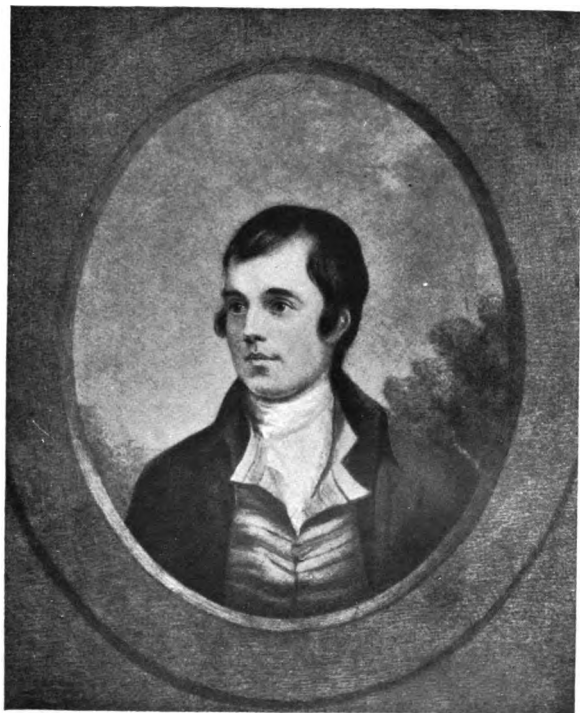
nothing more. "As for friendship," he writes to her, "you and Charlotte" [Charlotte Hamilton] "have given me pleasure, permanent pleasure, which the world 'cannot give nor take away,' I hope, and which will outlast the heavens and the earth."

Thus the poet's heart—notwithstanding the renewal of relations with Armour—was still in a partly widowed condition when, in the beginning of December, he was introduced to Mrs. Macle-hose, a lady of his own age living apart from her husband. The daughter of a Glasgow surgeon, and cousin-german of a lord of session, she was yet in so straitened circumstances as to be compelled to live in partial retirement from society. Of good education, superficially clever, avowedly a strict Calvinist, yet with instincts and emotions only partially disciplined by piety, she occupied a good deal of her leisure in literary studies and dabbled a little in verse. Her frank, if rather effusive, manners at once put her on a footing of easy friendship with the bard, who was also a good deal struck by her rather pronounced physical charms. What course matters might have taken had he not shortly after the first interview met with an accident, which confined him for some weeks to the house, it is idle to conjecture; but having now "nothing else to do," it occurred to him that a flirtation with the good-

hearted and emotional "widow" (as he preferred to regard her) would at least help pleasantly to pass the time, while she apparently deemed it at once a privilege and pious duty to do her best to mitigate his loneliness. When, therefore, in a letter relating the accident, he expressed his chagrin at being meanwhile unable to carry out his determination to cultivate her "friendship with the enthusiasm of religion," she promptly responded in a manner almost equally ardent; and the cultivation at once proceeded apace. The assumption by the correspondents, at a very early period, of the fictitious poetical names Clarinda and Sylvander, greatly aided in enticing them toward warmth of utterance, for the language might be interpreted in a partly fictitious sense. But it was always mainly Sylvander who used the language of passion; and Clarinda almost to the last sought to give a Platonic colour to an infatuation which had taken absolute possession of her.

The letters have been well described by Scott as "the most extraordinary mixture of sense and nonsense, and of love human and divine, that was ever given to the eye of the world."<sup>1</sup> They are, however, unsatisfactory and unpleasant rather than strictly ridiculous. Clever, indeed, those of both correspondents always are, and as fervent

<sup>1</sup> *Familiar Correspondence*, i. 92.



ROBERT BURNS

*From the original painting by Nasmyth*



as the most gushing sentimentalist could wish ; but with all their passion, manifest or occult, they suggest very much a game of hide-and-seek. Both were in a false position, and neither could be perfectly sincere with the other. Clarinda, though she had had, from Sylvander's own lips, the very latest particulars regarding his relations with Armour—whom she patronised and pitied—was, it is true, utterly in love with Sylvander ; but she was making brave pretences, both to herself and to him, that her love was merely a beautiful variety of ardent friendship. Sylvander, who, while he hugely admired Clarinda, quite saw through her pretences, was not merely flattered and touched by her passion for him, but, after his old manner, had “battered” himself into at least a temporary passion—violent enough its paroxysms occasionally were—for her ; yet, notwithstanding his protestations and perturbations, he seems to have been pretty much heart-whole ; and in spite of his appeals to the Deity to bless and hallow “their love and friendship,” he knew in his heart that, at its present pitch, the friendship could not long continue without ceasing to be hallowed. Necessarily Clarinda cuts a much better figure in the correspondence than Sylvander. In such cases the superiority is for the most part with the lady ; and besides, the bard, with all his genius, was



handicapped by his peasanthood, and by the influence of the methods of courtship which he had practised towards his rustic mistresses. Then Clarinda is always herself, and expresses mainly her own convictions—sometimes even in a manner that might have offended Sylvander, had he deemed her convictions of very much importance. But so little importance does he attach to them, that he is contented to humour her, even to the extent of pretending that he is quite as pious as she could wish him to be. He is ever playing up to Clarinda's lead. Thus while his ardour, so far as asseverations go, seems to be ever on the increase, the tone of his letters gets to be, in reality, more and more feigned; the flattery, always lacking a little in tact and grace, tends gradually towards mere fulsomeness; and at first, fighting shy of committing himself to very definite religious sentiments, he latterly becomes even more superfluously religious than Clarinda.

✓ But no doubt Clarinda appealed strongly to a certain side of his nature, and he fully appreciated her good-heartedness and her excellent intentions. He was, we may well believe, sincere enough, for the time being, in his regrets that he had not seen her, or some one like her, sooner; for this is merely to say, he wished his past had been utterly different from what it was.

But with such a past as had been his, it was now more and more brought home to him that the future before him was one in which Mrs. Macle hose—had she been even free to marry him—could have neither lot nor part. Clarinda, in her relations with Sylvander, was apparently content to indulge in the luxury of an unending day-dream. Sylvander knew that his and her day-dream must end as soon as his holiday was over: if he was bent on anything, it was simply on making the most of it while it lasted—with an almost reckless disregard of consequences. But the spell of fascination became relaxed during temporary visits to Ayrshire; and as soon as he had made up his mind to acknowledge Armour as his wife, his main aim seems to have been to persuade Clarinda that his love or friendship for her could never suffer change whatever might be his future. It was thus his hope that when the news reached her—for of his intentions he prudently breathed to her not a word—that he had set up house with Armour, she would understand that his love to her remained unchanged, and that no violence was intended towards the old Arcadian arrangement. Small wonder, then, that during the last few days of his stay in Edinburgh he was “positively crazed”—crazed not merely by the gushing kindness of Clarinda, but by his very efforts to leave on her such a

lasting impression of his regard for her—in view of the fact that she would very soon learn of his decision in favour of the “poor girl” whom she “pitied.” By virtue of his sympathetic genius, he could almost make Clarinda’s cruel disappointment his own; and, indeed, it is rather the realisation of her condition, than any absorbing passion for her, that probably inspires the best of the lyrics in her honour, and more particularly the exquisitely expressed quatrain of the song written after the reconciling interview, before she was about to set out to Jamaica to rejoin, as she supposed, for good and all, her husband—

“Had we never loved sae kindly,  
Had we never loved sae blindly,  
Never met, or never parted,  
We had ne’er been broken-hearted.”

## CHAPTER VI

ELLISLAND—1788-1791.

Future Plans—Ellisland taken—Promised Commission as Exciseman—Shelters Jean Armour—Recognises her as his Wife—His Reasons for this—Last Appearance before the Kirk-session—Life at Ellisland—Friendship with Mrs. Dunlop—Captain Riddell—Burns and Farming—Poetic Aims—Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*—As Lyrist—His English Verse—"Tam o' Shanter," etc.—Untoward Circumstances—Becomes Exciseman—Farm a Failure—Poetic Studies—Prepares to leave Ellisland—Farm Sales.

**I**T was always with much misgiving Burns contemplated the resumption of his old life. Had he been able to discover a more feasible way of living, he would gladly have ceased to be a farmer. That he was willing even to become exciseman shows how little he was enamoured of his old calling, and how slight was his hope of success in it.

"Searching auld wives' barrels,  
Och, hon, the day!  
That clarty barm should stain my laurels!"—

so he wrote when some sixteen months afterwards he did become exciseman. The Clarinda hallucination also exercised a disturbing influence, and rendered a decisive choice more difficult. Then he may not unnaturally have hoped, and even expected, that his influential friends would succeed in obtaining for him some kind of pleasant sinecure, which would enable him to cultivate the Muses at his leisure without danger of starvation. That no such attempt was made may be attributed partly to their inadequate appreciation of his genius—highly though they may have esteemed his verse; and partly to the fact that he was of too strong and independent personality to win the unmingled approbation of dispensers of patronage. But a nomination to the excise he might, without unduly straining the generosity of his friends, very well aspire to, although even this, we learn from a letter to Clarinda, was not quite to be had for the asking. "I have," he writes, "almost given up the excise idea. I have been just now to wait on a great person, Miss ——'s friend. Why will great people not only deafen us with the din of their equipage, and dazzle us with their fastidious pomp, but they must also be so very dictatorially wise? I have been questioned like a child about my matters, and blamed and schooled for my inscription on the Stirling window. Come,





ELLISLAND

*From the engraving of the picture by D. O. Hill in Blackie's "Land of Burns," 1844*

Clarinda !—‘Come, curse me Jacob ; come, defy me Israel.’” But having obtained from him some kind of apology or promise, his patrons condescended to grant his humble crave ; and since it did not occur to them that, in securing such a nomination for him, they were really conspirators in demeaning, and not rewarding, the greatest British poet of his time, he was fain, whatever his personal reflections may have been, to be content with it. About the middle of February, therefore, he wrote that he had almost resolved to alter all his “plans of future life,” and instead of taking a farm to become as soon as possible an exciseman. With the intention of paying a short visit to the west, before returning “to Edinburgh for six weeks’ instruction in excise duties,” he set out on the 18th February ; but after examining the farm of Ellisland, Dumfriesshire, with the help of an old friend, Tennant of Glenconner, deemed “the most intelligent farmer” of Ayrshire, he was so impressed with that friend’s favourable, though misleading, opinion of it, that he wrote to Robert Ainslie that in all probability he would become a farmer should Mr. Miller (of Dalswinton, who was proprietor of Ellisland) be in the same favourable disposition as when he saw him last. So much, indeed, was he taken with Ellisland, and especially with its romantic situation on the Nith, that he



immediately made an offer for it, and as early as 18th March an arrangement was come to for a long lease at £50 a year for the first three years, and £70 for the remainder, Mr. Miller further agreeing to spend £300 in erecting a new farm steading, and in other improvements. But the whole course of his former experience having led Burns to be very dubious of his success as a farmer, he, as wisely as his peculiar circumstances would permit, also obtained, while in Edinburgh, the promise of an order for instruction as exciseman, which was issued to an office in Tarbolton on 31st March. "As I got the offer," he writes to Mrs. Dunlop, "of the excise business without solicitation" [this, however, as we have seen, is not a quite accurate statement], "and as it costs me only six weeks' attendance for instruction, to entitle me to a commission—which commission lies by me, and at any future period, on my simple petition, can be resumed—I thought five-and-thirty pounds a year was no bad *dernier ressort* for a poor poet, if Fortune in her jade tricks should kick him down from the little eminence to which she has lately helped him."

Once Burns did resolve to resume farming a helpmeet became necessary; but it may be that his main reason for preferring farming to the excise was that he had determined to make Jean Armour his helpmeet. When he reached

Mauchline from Edinburgh, she was about, a second time, to become a mother, and on this account (but perhaps to arouse the bard's pity) had been driven from her home. It was after finding temporary shelter for her with Mrs. Muir, of Tarbolton Mill, that he set out to inspect the Dumfriesshire farms; and immediately on his return he procured for her a lodging in Mauchline, and "reconciled her to her mother"—probably by letting the mother understand that he intended to recognise her as his wife; for on the 7th March he thus details his doings and intentions to Brown: I "have turned her into a convenient harbour, where she may lie snug until she unload, and have taken command myself not ostensibly, but for a time in secret." When the birth of the twins—who died shortly afterwards—took place, is uncertain, for the entry of the fact in his family Bible under the date 3rd March is inconsistent with his statement to Brown on the 7th. In his letters to Clarinda he made no reference to it, and it may not have occurred when he left Mauchline on the 10th.

Had Burns wished to escape recognising Armour, he might have found a kind of excuse in the fact that by the death of all the children in her charge—for the first twin daughter was also dead, and the boy was at Mossgiel—she was free from encumbrances; and but for the fact

that Burns was, as he phrased it, "totally unlike any one else," we would almost be bound to conclude, from the available evidence, that his love for her had completely evaporated. It was not merely that he was, at this time, under the spell of the most ecstatic phase of the Clarinda enamourment—for double enamourments are not by any means uncommon; but he wrote of the "poor girl," both to Ainslie and Clarinda, in terms in the one case inconsistent with respect for her, and in the other of love for her. But while the letters are inexcusable even as practical jokes, they may be explained by his desire to allay the jealous curiosity of Clarinda as to his real intentions in taking a farm. He wished to be at least safely out of Edinburgh before the storm broke, if it was to break, and he may even have hoped that—if Clarinda got to be convinced that he had married the "poor girl" from pity or necessity, and not from love—the storm would not break at all, or merely in gentle showers. Certainly, if Ainslie reported—as he apparently was expected to do—that Burns had no intention of recognising Armour as his wife, this would so powerfully corroborate the representations of Burns to her, as to dispel all anxiety as to the "poor girl" supplanting her in his affections. Indeed, the contrast between the "poor girl" and Clarinda is evidently stated in terms so

extravagant as sufficiently to correspond with Clarinda's own conceptions of the disparity. "Here was tasteless insipidity, vulgarity of soul, and mercenary fawning. There polished good sense, heaven-born genius, and the most generous, the most delicate, the most tender passion."

Clarinda rose to the glittering bait without a shadow of suspicion. It was perhaps the only bait that could have served Sylvander's purpose, and that it was quite successful does infinite credit—if otherwise discreditable—to his discernment of Clarinda's peculiarities. There was, of course, also a faint grain of sincerity in Sylvander's protestations. He must have been struck by the very great contrast between his old life "of drudgery behind the scenes," and his life during the few short months of his Edinburgh triumph. The "poor girl" was associated with the old life of drudgery, and Clarinda with the months of triumph; and the tragedy of Sylvander's situation was that he was compelled to return with the "poor girl" to his old life of drudgery. At the same time, while he fully appreciated the benefits of culture and refinement, and could fascinate the most polished and clever men and women of his time, he was not averse to mingle in the rudest and even coarsest companies. Indeed, with our knowledge of the manifold character of his social adventures, it is impossible to credit

that his intercourse with Clarinda had inspired him with distaste for the more homely charms of the "poor girl." The whole tenor of his conduct towards Armour, and of all his references to her—except those intended for Clarinda's ears—indicate that she had very special attractions for him. Then, though lacking in a certain form of force of character, she appears to have had an admirable temper and considerable tact; and their dispositions seem to have harmonised well. But in recognising her as his wife he seems to have been influenced by the conviction that, by virtue of the unlucky "paper," they really were married; for he informed Mrs. Dunlop that at the beginning they took steps "for a private marriage," and that finally, after his return from Edinburgh and reconciliation with her parents, the "marriage was declared." To Mrs. Dunlop he also referred to her as a "once much-loved, and still much-loved female," and he describes her "points" thus: "The most placid good-nature and sweetness of disposition; a warm heart, gratefully devoted with all its powers to love me; vigorous health and sprightly cheerfulness, set off to the best advantage by a more than common handsome figure—these, I think, in a woman may make a good wife, though she should never read a page but the 'Scriptures of the Old and New Testament,' nor have danced in a brighter



MRS. BURNS AND GRANDDAUGHTER

*After the painting by S. Mackenzie*



assembly than a penny pay wedding." To Miss Chalmers he wrote of her thus: "If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the country. Mrs. Burns believes, as firmly as her creed, that I am *le plus bel esprit, et le plus honnête homme* in the universe; although she scarcely ever in her life, except the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and the Psalms of David in metre, spent five minutes together on either prose or verse.—I must except also from this last, a certain late publication of Scots poems, which she has perused very devoutly; and all the ballads of the country, as she has (Oh the partial lover! you will cry) the finest 'wood note wild' I ever heard." Both those two accounts harmonise with an entry in his Common-Place Book: "Wedlock—the circumstance that buckles me hardest to care, if Virtue and Religion were to be anything with me but names—was what in a few seasons I must have resolved on; in my present situation it was absolutely necessary. Humanity, generosity, honest pride of character, justice to my own happiness for afterlife, so far as it could depend (which it surely will a great deal) on internal peace; all



these joined their warmest suffrages, their most powerful solicitations, with a rooted attachment, to urge the step I have taken. Nor have I any reason on her part to repent it. I can fancy how, but I have never seen where, I could have made a better choice." These private memoranda place beyond doubt his strong attachment to his wife, and his substantial content with the arrangement, as the best he could have made in the circumstances. But they also show how very well he realised the contrast between his actual circumstances and those that might have been, had his past not been what it was. He had resolved to make the best of them, but it was rather with resignation than with any high hope—so often had he already been defeated. "I am such a coward in life"—so, at this very time, he confesses to himself,—“so tired of the service, that I would almost at any time, with Milton's Adam, gladly lay me in my mother's lap, and be at peace."

After he had settled, for the time being, with Creech, and escaped in safety from Clarinda (whom he presented with a pair of drinking glasses, along with a poetical address beginning—

“Fair Empress of the Poet's soul,  
And Queen of Poetesses”),

Burns proceeded to Dumfriesshire; and, having

arranged certain matters in regard to his occupation of Ellisland, he returned to Ayrshire in order to undertake a course of instruction in his excise duties, before entering on his farm at Whitsunday term. Shortly after his return, he took up his residence with Jean Armour at Mauchline, without any marriage ceremony. It has been surmised that some formal attestation was made before Gavin Hamilton; but (1) such attestation would have stultified his own conduct, his contention being that the unlucky "paper" was valid; and (2) had Gavin Hamilton been concerned in effecting an irregular marriage, he would have brought himself under the discipline of the kirk-session. On 7th August Burns and his wife were rebuked by the Mauchline kirk-session, not for fornication, but for their irregular marriage, and this implies that the irregular marriage referred to was the earlier one, and not one that took place after the birth of the second twins. Nor was any full ecclesiastical ceremony performed; the marriage was only solemnly confirmed by their engaging, in the presence of the kirk-session, "to adhere faithfully to one another all the days of their life." Now that Burns was a man of mark, the kirk-session treated him with a courtesy that says much for their common-sense. The rebuke was in private; and, while the session reminded him that they had

"a title in law to some fine for behoof of the poor," they politely left the matter to his "generosity," whereupon he "gave a guinea-note"; and this, so far as is known, was the last of his transactions with the "poacher court."

The domicile of Burns and his wife was still at Mauchline; for, pending the erection of the new farm-house, Mrs. Burns remained in Ayrshire, receiving meanwhile instruction from the mother and sisters of Burns in dairy matters. At Ellisland Burns, for the time being, was, as he tells Mrs. Dunlop, the "solitary inmate of an old, smoky spence"; but he spent, he says, about half his time in Ayrshire. The temporary separation from his wife led to the production of one of his most charming lyrics, "Of a' the Airts the Wind can Blaw." After finishing his harvest—regarding which he wrote to Miss Chalmers: "You will be pleased to hear that I have laid aside idle *éclat*, and bind every day after my reapers"—he returned to Mauchline, where he seems to have remained until he accompanied Mrs. Burns to Ellisland, in the first week of December. Already, however, he had begun to suspect that his farming project would not turn out a profitable one. To make his farm pay, a good deal of outlay was necessary, and this, from lack of capital—for, on account of loans to his brothers and sisters, to save them from ruin, he started

with only £200—he could not afford, an immediate return being, in his case, absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, during those earlier years he was still full of hope. He had, should the farm fail, the excise to fall back upon; and the great success of his Edinburgh volume had given a new interest to his life. The results had not been perhaps all that he had at one time fondly hoped, but he had at least been delivered from absolute poverty. He was no longer a mere obscure and penniless ploughboy, but a poet already even more famed than Ramsay. He enjoyed the goodwill and affection of thousands of his countrymen; and he had secured for himself many friendships of varying degrees of importance. Some of those friends became friends for life, though his circumstances were necessarily in some cases a barrier to the full realisation of the benefits of friendship.

Amongst the truest and warmest of his friends, was Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, who, having by the perusal of the Kilmarnock volume been delivered from a condition of great despondency, regarded herself as under the deepest of obligations to him. Amongst all his friends, she was the most constantly solicitous for his welfare; and, while the most benevolent of his Edinburgh patrons were content with subscribing largely for his Edinburgh volume, she manifested, from the first, a strong

desire for the permanent betterment of his condition in life. One of her earliest suggestions was that he might obtain a commission in the army; and when he informed her that he thought of taking a farm, she, though formally applauding, mentioned that Adam Smith (the political economist) had suggested his becoming a salt officer, the duties being both easier and pleasanter than those of the excise. Unhappily, from the absence of Adam Smith in London, Burns failed to meet him in Edinburgh, and so applied for an excise appointment. Mrs. Dunlop could not contemplate with the same equanimity as his other friends did the idea of his becoming excise-man. If any change were made, she wished it to be for the better,—not for the worse. When, accordingly, she learned of the proposal to found a chair of Agriculture in Edinburgh University, she at once suggested to him to become a candidate; but Burns knew both himself and his Edinburgh life better than she did, and he replied: “I believe the professorship you mention will be an idle project; but whatever it may be, I, or such as I, am quite out of the question.”

In many other ways, also, she testified to the depth and sincerity of her friendship for him. Nor did she fail to elicit a warm response of friendship on his part; but though fully sensible of her kindness, her intercourse with him was apt



in several ways to embarrass him. Her solicitude for his welfare was too minute; it was impossible for him to model himself on her ideals; and latterly, without vouchsafing any reason, she discontinued her correspondence with him.

Much of his intercourse with Mrs. Dunlop was carried on by letter, visits being paid to her on his occasional journeys between Ellisland and Mauchline. Among his near neighbours, the most congenial of his friends was Captain Riddell of Glenriddell, an accomplished musician, and versed in all kinds of antiquarian lore, including that of old songs and ballads. He gave the poet a key for his private grounds, and the little hermitage of Friars Carse, on a window of which Burns wrote the verses beginning—

“Thou, who chance may hither lead,  
Be thou clad in russet weed,” etc.

At Glenriddell's fireside, he states that he had “enjoyed more pleasant evenings than at all the evenings of fashionable people together”; and he also thus expresses in verse his sentiments towards him—

“Dear Sir, at onie time or tide  
I'd rather sit wi' you than ride,  
Tho' 'twere with royal Geordie;  
And trowth! your kindness soon and late,  
Aft gars me to mysel look blate;  
The Lord in Heaven reward ye!”

At Ellisland he was only six miles from Dumfries, but until he became exciseman he made very few acquaintances there. Writing to Mr. Beugo, Edinburgh, 9th September 1788, he says: "For all that most pleasurable part of life called social communication, I am here at the very elbow of existence. The only things that are to be found in this country, in any degree of perfection, are stupidity and canting. Prose they only know in graces, prayers, etc., and the value of these they estimate as they do their plaiding webs—by the ell! As for the Muses, they have as much an idea of a rhinoceros as of a poet."

Still, Burns for a time might have been pretty well content with his lot, had his farm promised to be a fair bargain, and had he been able to secure for himself sufficient leisure for perfecting himself in his art. He had little or no interest, be it remembered, in farming, except as a means of securing a livelihood. In the past, farming had been mainly the galley of his slavery; and he would have much preferred to have bidden farewell for ever to even a faint repetition of his old galley experiences. "The heart of the man," he on 17th December 1788 wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, "and the fancy of the poet are the two grand considerations for which I live: if miry ridges and dirty dunghills are to engross the best part of the function of my soul immortal, I had better

been a rook or a magpie at once, and then I should not have been plagued with any ideas superior to breaking of clods and picking up grubs; not to mention barn-door cocks or mallards—creatures with which I could almost exchange lives at any time.”

But his notions of comfort were in no way luxurious; his landlord was disposed to be considerate; his scale of farming was “simple and easy”; and on the supposition that the farm should turn out a fairly good bargain, he expected to have a good deal of spare time to devote to poetry.

It is a mistake to suppose—as some have done, without taking the trouble to consult his own testimony—that Burns in his later years limited his poetic endeavours mainly to song-writing, because he believed either that his special *metier* was that of a lyrist, or that an exquisite song was worthy to rank, as an artistic achievement, with any of the more elaborate forms of poetry. It was indeed a fortunate circumstance that he was induced to devote some special attention to song-writing; for although a large number of the songs he wrote to order, especially those in English, are of minor merit, he was led to acquire an exceptional acquaintance with all sorts of old lyrics, preserved in popular Scottish tradition; and having thoroughly imbibed the spirit and sentiment of



this ancient art, he achieved several masterpieces, which have acquired a popularity almost unequalled in comprehensiveness. But none knew better than he how imperfectly his songs represented the greater possibilities of his genius, and how very fragmentary all his poetic achievements were, compared with what they might have come to be under happier auspices. He set no very great store by his Edinburgh volume. It consisted mainly of tentative performances, representing the random efforts of powers imperfectly tutored. By a more intimate study of literature, and a more systematic discipline, he hoped to acquire a much more perfect mastery of his art. "Whether," he wrote to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham on 22nd January 1789, "I may make my footing good on any considerable height of Parnassus, is what I do not know; but I am determined to strain every nerve in the trial. Though the rough material of fine writing is undoubtedly the gift of genius, the workmanship is certainly the united effort of labour, attention, and pains." On the same day he repeats similar sentiments to another correspondent. To Robert Cleghorn he also writes on the 23rd: "I am more able to support myself and family, though in a humble yet an independent way, and I mean, just at my leisure, to pay my court to the tuneful Sisters, in hopes that they may one day enable me

*Bishop* to carry on a work of some importance." And to Dr. John Geddes he, on 3rd February, expresses himself thus: "I am determined to study Man and Nature, and in that view incessantly to try if the ripening and corrections of years can enable me to produce something worth preserving."

Meantime he had become deeply interested in a project of James Johnson, an Edinburgh engraver, for a collection of Scottish songs with music harmonised for the pianoforte. To the first volume of Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, which appeared in the summer of 1787, he contributed two songs; and of the remaining five volumes he was to all intents and purposes literary editor, and in part musical editor as well. On leaving Edinburgh, in May 1787, he wrote to Johnson: "Had my acquaintance with you been a little older, I would have asked the favour of your correspondence, as I have met with few people whose company and conversation gave me so much pleasure, because I have met with few whose sentiments are so congenial to my own." The acquaintanceship was renewed on his return to Edinburgh in the autumn; and such of his letters to Johnson as have been preserved exhibit, in a very pleasant manner, his kindness and tactful consideration. He was perhaps more devoted to the success of Johnson's publication than even Johnson himself, and gratuitously did everything

he could for it, by collecting old verses whenever he had opportunity through correspondence or personal intercourse, by writing new songs to old airs, and especially by condensing or amending old lyrics, or utilising old fragments of verse so as, while preserving much of their original flavour, to give to their sentiments and emotion a more adequate and finished utterance. His success in rejuvenating older lyrics has never perhaps been rivalled; and, while this is to be accounted for largely by the depth and comprehensiveness of his imaginative sympathy, as well as by the exceptional delicacy of his artistic perceptions, the unique character of his opportunity must not be forgotten. He had a moribund literature of a very remarkable excellence to work his will upon. On account of the Puritanic character of the Scottish Reformation, there existed, in popular tradition, an immense amount of clandestine effusions, many of them of considerable antiquity, and the work of bards of no mean skill; and, notwithstanding the havoc wrought by Ramsay and others amongst those old lyrics, there still remained in popular tradition many floating fragments of verse, which, even when halting and rude in expression, as they had often come to be, were of inestimable value for their antique expression and style, and their ingenuous sincerity. In this way Burns was supplied, not merely with many

ready-made themes, but with valuable suggestions in regard to artistic methods. On the old methods, he could and did improve; but he also to a considerable extent conformed to them, and thus was able to appeal more irresistibly, perhaps, than he could otherwise have done, to the heart of the people. But, if his opportunity was unique, he was also uniquely fitted, by condition of life, by temperament, and by special artistic endowment, to make the most of it.

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Apart from songs, Burns, after his Edinburgh success, devoted such leisure as he could spare, mainly to occasional pieces on passing events, and current topics of interest, a number of which he sent to a London newspaper, the *Morning Star*, edited by Peter Stuart. Most of these pieces were purely English, not only in language, but in manner; and it is very evident that, for the time being, he was disposed to take rather seriously the advice of Dr. Moore and other friends, that he "should abandon the Scottish stanza and dialect, and adopt the measure and dialect of modern English poetry." Whether he would ever have attained to supreme excellence in purely English verse, it would perhaps be rash either to affirm or deny. But this can be said: that the English pieces written during the Highland tour in 1787 are greatly lacking in spontaneity; that subsequent as well as previous

essays in blank verse, though they plainly involved intense effort, are strangely destitute of true poetic melody; and that such pieces as "Written in Friars Carse Hermitage," "Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald," "Ode to the Departed Regency Bill," "Inscribed to the Hon. C. J. Fox," "Ode for General Washington's Birthday," etc., while displaying some mastery of certain eighteenth-century English metres and containing some vigorous phrasing, are mainly rhetorical, and sometimes merely bombastic. That he ever experimented in political odes is perhaps to be regretted, since it may have tended to prevent the recognition of his talents by some substantial government reward; but no poetic harm could result from his endeavours to test, in every possible way, where the real strength of his genius lay. So marked was his individuality, and so sterling his artistic endowment, that, given time and opportunity, he was bound to free himself from all conventional hindrances to the true development of his genius, and to follow a course determined by the guidance of his own inspiration. What apparently he mainly needed was leisure, and a certain measure of content with his circumstances. It may, of course, be argued that he had already contracted habits that made it difficult for him to turn his leisure to good account, and that the contrast between

his habits and his artistic tastes and needs was too great to permit of an altogether satisfactory issue under any given circumstances. But the given circumstances were almost as unfavourable as they could have been ; and it is at least allowable to suppose that, in circumstances more easy and congenial, the poetic achievements of his later years would have been much more substantial. Of their possible character he was able to supply at least one striking specimen, in "Tam o' Shanter," which, written in the spring of 1791, at the instance of Captain Grose, is not only one of his happiest inspirations, but displays, as he justly asserts, a great advance in "finishing polish." His tribute to Captain Matthew Henderson, written in the summer of 1790, and clothed in the old "Habbie Simson" stanza, is also more exquisitely phrased, and freer from minor imperfections than his earlier pieces in the same measure. But neither this elegy, nor "Tam o' Shanter" had any successors ; though the latter suggests that he had hit on a new poetic vein of exceptional richness, and that in weirdly humorous Scottish tales he might have found scope for the exercise of the most characteristic qualities of his genius.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> To Alexander Cunningham and others he refers to it as his "first essay in the way of tales" ; and to A. F. Tytler he wrote, your approbation "has given me such

His circumstances, however, so far from becoming more favourable for the adequate prosecution of his art, were gradually but steadily worsening. As early as 25th March 1789 he confided to Mrs. Dunlop that, being a "stranger to the country, the farm, and the soil," he had ventured "on a bargain that, instead of being comfortable, is and will be a very, very, hard bargain, if at all practicable." By August he had realised that his second year's crop would not be more encouraging than that of his first year; and, deeming it therefore advisable to revert to his excise project, he made application to Graham of Fintry for nomination as excise officer of his own rural district. On the 19th he wrote in high spirits to Mrs. Dunlop: "I mentioned to you my excise hopes and views. I have been once more a lucky fellow in that quarter. The exciseman's salaries are now £50 per ann., and I believe the board have been so obliging as fix me in the division in which I live; and I suppose I shall begin doing duty at the commencement of next month. I shall have a large portion of county, but, what to me and my studies is no trifling matter, it is a

additional spirits to persevere in this species of poetic composition, that I am already revolving two or three stories in my fancy." But his difficulties on account of his farm were then at their worst, and his intentions bore no fruit.

fine romantic country." To enable himself to undertake the double charge of his farm and his excise duties, he decided to lay down most of his land in grass for dairy purposes, the management being undertaken mainly by his wife. Most of the leisure he could spare from the excise was, however, devoted to the farm, many of his early mornings being occupied with farm work before he set out on his excise rounds. But contrive as he might, the disheartening conviction was soon forced upon him that the farm was yielding almost no profits, and that when the rent came to be raised to seventy pounds, he would really be occupying it at a loss. Small wonder, then, that on 11th January 1790 he wrote to his brother Gilbert: "This farm has undone my enjoyment of myself. It is a ruinous affair on all hands. But let it go to ——! I'll fight it out, and be off with it." Yet that he was not allowing either the unfortunate results of his farming experiment or the engrossing cares and labours of his double charge to discourage him in his studies, is evident from an order, which on 2nd March he gave to Peter Hill, bookseller in Edinburgh: "I want likewise for myself, as you can pick them up, second-handed or cheap copies of Otway's dramatic works, Ben Jonson's, Dryden's, Congreve's, Wycherley's, Vanburgh's, Cibber's, or any dramatic works of the more modern—



Macklin, Garrick, Foote, Colman, or Sheridan. A good copy, too, of Molière in French I much want. Any other good dramatic authors in that language I want also; but comic authors chiefly, though I should wish to have Racine, Corneille, and Voltaire too." Whether, with his limited knowledge of stage details, Burns could have written a successful Scottish play, may be doubted. His possession of even an adequate dramatic instinct has been questioned; but that in some respects he knew his own strong points is shown by his intention to make a special study of the French comic authors; and it is very certain that his experiments in comedy would not have been lacking in at least true wit and humour.

But the letter to Hill is now of moment mainly for its testimony as to the thoroughgoing conceptions entertained by Burns of his art, and the strenuous study which he deemed essential to the serious prosecution of it. It emphasises unavailing regret for the irony of his situation. All his highest plans and purposes he had meanwhile to postpone; and this was in the end to mean that he had to forego them altogether. His main energies had to be concentrated, not on his art, but on a sordid struggle for subsistence; and, notwithstanding his excise salary, so hampered was he at this time in his circumstances that he was compelled, not merely to discontinue receiving

the volumes he had empowered Hill to "pick up," but to postpone the full payment of those he had received—probably until he received some ready money from the sale of his farm crop. This took place at the end of August 1791. Writing to Thomas Sloan, on 1st September, he says: "I sold my crop on this day se'en-night, and sold it very well—a guinea an acre, on an average, above value. But such a scene of drunkenness was hardly ever seen in this country. After the roup was over, about thirty people engaged in a battle, every man for his own hand, and fought it out for three hours. Nor was the scene much better in the house. No fighting indeed, but folks lying drunk on the floors," etc. The special excesses at the sale are perhaps to be explained by the large and heterogeneous company attracted by his popularity; but excessive drinking was then the rule at farm rouns, as it was on nearly all social occasions of importance,—a fact which requires to be considered in order to understand how easy it was, in those days, to contract habits of inebriety.

The sale of his farm stock at the end of the year was equally successful; and since he also received something from his landlord—who then happened to have a good offer for the sale of the farm, with which he wished to close—for parting

with his lease, he left Ellisland with a considerable sum of ready money. Writing to Mrs. Dunlop, he says: "Ruin awaited me as a farmer; though with that peculiar good luck that for some years past has attended all my motions, I have got rid of my farm with little if any loss"; and since Mrs. Burns also testifies that they did not come "empty-handed to Dumfries," and that his farming had not really been a failure, his statement can only be understood to mean that he lost little of the original capital invested in it. But unless his estimate was much too sanguine, or he sent some of the money to his brother, what he took with him to Dumfries must have been spent very rapidly.





DUMFRIES FROM THE OBSERVATORY

## CHAPTER VII

### DUMFRIES—1792-1796

Burns and the Excise—Declines Offer of Captain Miller—  
Drawbacks of Excise and of Dumfries Life—Social  
Habits—Excise Gag—Political and Social Views—Dis-  
content—Postponement of Poetic Aims—Thomson's  
*Scottish Airs*—Character of Contributions to Thomson's  
\*Work—Poetry of his Later Years—Causes of Indifferent  
Health—Convivial Habits—Burns and Mrs. Riddell—  
Dumfries Gossip—Last Illness—Death—Legacy.

BEFORE giving up his farm, Burns had arranged for his transference as an ordinary exciseman to Dumfries, at a salary of £70 per annum. He had also hopes of speedy promotion to be port officer at a salary of £90, and this he obtained some time in 1792; but with this appointment he obtained the summit of the worldly success that was to be vouchsafed him. In keeping with the humble character of his immediate prospects, he rented the second floor of a house in the "Wee Vennel," now known as Bank Street, consisting of three small apart-

ments; but at Whitsunday 1793 he removed to a good detached cottage on the Mill Vennel.

In trusting to the excise as a means of livelihood, Burns adopted almost the only course open to him. Having had experience of the uncertainties of other methods of earning a livelihood, he was specially enamoured of the security of an assured salary; and therefore when, in May 1794, Captain Miller of Dalswinton proposed that he should settle in London as contributor to the *Morning Chronicle*, on much better terms than he could hope for from the excise, he felt compelled, being uncertain how he might permanently succeed, to decline the proposal. "Your offer," he wrote, "is indeed truly generous, and most sincerely do I thank you for it; but in my present situation I find that I dare not accept it. You well know my political sentiments; and were I an insular individual, unconnected with a wife and a family of children, with the most fervid enthusiasm I would have volunteered my services; I then could, and would, have despised all consequences that might have ensued. My prospect in the excise is something; at least, it is, encumbered as I am with the welfare, the very existence, of near half a score of helpless individuals, what I dare not sport with."

That Burns should have been compelled to look mainly to the excise for his success in life, can

hardly be deemed fortunate. True it is, that, with a personality so exceptional, he was almost bound, under any conditions, to meet in life with serious stumbling blocks, and to find its common tasks more than a little irksome. To use his own phrase, he had no vocation for the "sober gin-horse routine of existence." Notwithstanding his keen intellectuality, and his great practical shrewdness, extremely passionate and emotional, sympathetic almost to excess, and exquisitely gifted for the appreciation of the pleasures of the passing moment, he was heavily handicapped for the achievement of worldly success after a pattern fashion. Nor had he ever a fair chance for the development of his best possibilities. Fortune had been to him exceptionally hard rather than kind. How tragic the mere fact that one so nobly gifted should have been during youth the victim of such sordid drudgery! That, his outward lot being such as it was, the gates of knowledge should have been so far open to him as they were, might almost be described as merely an additional piece of ill-luck; and it is at least certain that the cultivation of tastes and aspirations so little consonant to his circumstances by no means proved to be an unmixed blessing. But having been accustomed from childhood to a peasant life, he was in his maturer years most likely to find happiness and content in farming, provided he



had a fair chance of success, and found himself with leisure and comfort sufficient to enable him to bestow adequate attention on the art, which was almost all in all to him. Whether he would ever have succeeded as farmer, or whether success in farming would have substantially altered his destiny, and supplied him with the content and resolution needed for the adequate prosecution of his art, it is idle to speculate; but it is at least certain that relinquishment of farming meant, in his circumstances, the abandonment of his highest artistic ambitions. It so happened that after farming his only choice was the excise, and, so far as his art was concerned, it was decidedly a choice for the worse. Its only recommendations were a guaranteed income and the prospects of promotion; but as matters turned out, his promotion was very inconsiderable, and his income never quite sufficed for his immediate needs. On the other hand, the disadvantages were very serious. There was the initial one, that to a person of his temperament the duties were bound to be very distasteful. Indeed, so much reproach attached to the office in popular estimation that he felt a certain degradation in accepting it. Then, even before he removed to Dumfries, his employment created prolonged absences from home, and numerous calls at inns and taverns, where the convivial habits of his early manhood

had exceptional opportunities for revival. His conviviality led at least indirectly to his *amour*, less than a year after becoming exciseman, with the barmaid of the Globe Tavern, Dumfries, of which he himself penned a lyric memorial, with the desire that it should be published.<sup>1</sup> His removal to Dumfries afforded him access to much pleasant society; but so omnivorous were his social browsings that the change was socially to his disadvantage rather than otherwise; and the high ambitions he had cherished regarding his art become more and more difficult of accomplishment. To resist convivial allurements was, be it remembered, in his case, exceptionally hard. To him, as to Dr. Johnson, social intercourse was almost a necessary refuge from the miseries of hypochondria; and in addition to this his social instincts were very strong. No matter what their station or character, he was "hail fellow, well met" with almost every one; and whatever the nature of his company, he was speedily recognised as its leading spirit. The almost universal report of his most intelligent intimates is that the charm of his personality was irresistible, and that his conversation bore more striking testimony to his genius than did even his verse. Unhappily, the exercise of his genius in sociality was not quite

<sup>1</sup> "Yestreen I had a Pint of Wine," "the best love song," he declared, "I ever composed in my life."

innocuous to himself. In nearly every company he frequented, the consumption of much strong liquor was deemed almost an essential token of good fellowship; and if true of any, it was true of Burns, that a "jovial star reigned at his birth."

But perhaps the greatest disadvantage of his connection with the excise was that it largely debarred him from the expression of his true convictions on matters of high current importance, and thus deprived him of one of the rights he deemed most sacred. In those days, it was apparently supposed that an exciseman had no right even to political opinions, except those approved by the Government; and thus, as early as December 1792, the fact that Burns was capable of forming and expressing remarkable political opinions of his own, got him into serious trouble with the excise Board. Writing to Graham of Fintry, he says: "I have been surprised, confounded, and distracted by Mr. Mitchell, the collector, telling me that he has received an order from your Board to inquire into my political conduct, and blaming me as a person disaffected to government"; and all this apparently because it had been privately reported that he was a supporter of the reforming party in the House of Commons, and a sympathiser with the efforts of the French to rid themselves of an oppression, which might well "make wise men

mad." In his appeal for clemency to Graham, his main plea was the consequences to his wife and children; but though he avoided direct retraction by asserting that "to the British constitution, on revolution principles, next after my God, I am devoutly attached," it was understood that he would henceforth cease to give expression to his deepest political convictions even in conversation. We therefore find him giving vent to his sentiments in this characteristic fashion to Mrs. Dunlop: "I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips as to those unlucky politics; but to you I must breathe my sentiments. In this, as in everything else, I shall show the undisguised emotions of my soul," and he proceeds to do so; but even after the death of Burns, Dr. Currie did not think it advisable that the undisguised emotions of the poet's soul, on political matters, should be fully revealed, and cut short his quotation of the letter with a sentence beginning: "War I deprecate," etc. Burns's opinion of the Board's dictum, that "whatever might be men or measures," it was for him to be "silent and obedient," we find him, however, expressing very fully in a letter to the Earl of Mar, who had made friendly inquiries regarding the Board's treatment of him: "Does any man tell me," he says, "that my feeble efforts can be of no service, and that it does not belong to my humble station

to meddle with the concerns of a people? I can tell him that it is on such individuals as I that a nation has to rest, both for the hand of support and the eye of intelligence. The uninformed mob may swell a nation's bulk; and the titled, tinsel, courtly throng may be its feathered ornament; but the number of those who are elevated enough in life to reason and to reflect, yet low enough to keep clear of the venal contagion of a court—these are a nation's strength."

That, conscious as he was of his innate superiority to his censors, hating as he did every form of wrong and injustice, and endowed with such ability to advocate his own beliefs, he should have consented—for the sake of his wife and family—to stifle his opinions in regard to the burning social questions of his time, says much for his self-command. That he did not succeed altogether in stifling them, and was tempted occasionally to seek relief for his feelings in ill-timed explosions of impatience, is hardly surprising; and though significant enough of an inward rage and discontent, the rage and discontent, so far from, as some seem to think, calling for censure, must rather be regarded as part and parcel of his manhood. In the excitement of conviviality it was inevitable that this rage and discontent should occasionally come to the surface; but while he was clearly in the wrong in

attempting to propose toasts that were fitted to give offence in a mixed company, the irritability produced by the excise gag must be considered. Nor is it strange that the torture of such a gag should have tended to increase rather than diminish his sympathies with the French Revolutionists, and that those sympathies should have occasionally assumed a somewhat fantastic form. With his bitter experiences of the terrible thralldom of poverty, he was perhaps too scornful of the social distinctions created by wealth and rank, but he had at least some excuse. Nor, be it remembered, had he any belief in the superior insight of the poor. Though supremely interested in the good of the "people," he set but small store, as we have seen, on the judgment of the "uninformed mob." He was democratic in the sense that the welfare of the democracy was his first concern; but with his special knowledge of the democratic intelligence of his day, he had little faith in the count of democratic heads, as the test either of ecclesiastical or political wisdom. Mr. Grey Graham has remarked of Burns, that years before Dumfries "Dr. Blair had with unusual shrewdness said 'his politics smelt of the smithy.'"<sup>1</sup> But did it require unusual shrewdness in this "worthy and most respectable character," as Burns terms him, to feel distaste at the poet's

<sup>1</sup> *Scottish Men of Letters*, p. 412.

disrespect for "the mere carcase of greatness"? And does not Burns on Blair display a good deal more shrewdness than Blair on Burns? Of necessity the sympathies of Burns were with his own class; but though cherishing perhaps too Utopian notions regarding liberty and fraternity, he never subscribed to the Revolutionist faith in equality. Whatever opinion may be formed of the sentiments of "Is there for Honest Poverty," it does not contain even the germ of such a faith. It certainly proclaims the inherent dignity of man, apart from artificial social distinctions; but it seeks to rank every one according to the intrinsic worth of his personality. The truth is, that the politics of such an one as Burns—whatever the defects of their qualities—were bound to differ from those of Dr. Blair as sunlight does from moonlight. His expression of them might at times be wild and imprudent; they might even be the sentiments rather of a poetic dreamer than a politician; but he thought and wrote for the future as well as for the present; and part at least of his political dream is now tending more and more to become true. Never before has the necessity of considering the welfare and efficiency of each individual citizen been so fully realised; and however false the general estimate may yet be of what constitutes true success in life, and true worth and greatness, there is now at least a more general

desire to judge men rather by their performances in the varied fields of effort, and by their attitude towards their fellows, than by their mere wealth, or rank, or accidental, or professional dignities.

But what we are now concerned with, is the fact that the most distinguished Scotsman of his time was, on account of his hard circumstances, and the necessity of clinging to an office, which the well-meaning efforts of influential patrons had procured for him, unable to give expression to his political convictions, except indirectly and by stealth. The influence of such restraint in embittering his discontent with his lot can hardly be exaggerated. Nor can the real depth of that discontent be gauged, except indirectly by its silent effect on himself; for although he gave the world much of his confidence, there was always something which, following his own maxim, he kept to himself. But as regards his political and social sympathies, try as he might he could not altogether hide them. With an individuality so potent, his endeavours to cultivate the arts of silence and subserviency, while they did violence to his self-respect, were bound now and then to break down; and thus, in a time when patronage reigned supreme, his prospects of promotion—otherwise excellent, for his influential friends really desired to do the best for him they could—became seriously



imperilled. Had he obtained early promotion, had his circumstances been a little easier and brighter—though in Dumfries they were not quite sordid—and had he been free from the fret and worry caused by interference with the expression of his opinions, he might have been less easily tempted to recur to his old habit of spending his leisure where “two or three are met together”; and have seriously set himself to carry out the resolution he announced to several correspondents after he settled at Ellisland: “Poetry I am determined to prosecute with all my vigour.” This resolution was first indefinitely postponed, and then gradually abandoned. However we may explain it, he had, soon after his removal to Dumfries, if not before, lost heart for the strenuous prosecution of his higher artistic aims; and this, rather than the revival of his resolution, made him all the more ready to welcome a proposal of George Thomson — made in September 1792—for the contribution of songs to Thomson’s proposed *Scottish Airs with Poetry*. His art—whatever difficulties might hinder its full prosecution—was still his main joy, though it would appear that some external stimulus was needed to induce him to persevere with it. “As the request you make,” he wrote, “will positively add to my enjoyment in complying with it, I shall enter into your undertaking with all the small

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portion of abilities I have, strained to their utmost exertion by the impulse of enthusiasm." With characteristic generosity, but still more characteristic pride in his art, he also made the stipulation: "As to any remuneration, you may think my songs either above or below price; for they shall absolutely be one or the other." In regard to this he was inflexible, more so than in the case of another stipulation: "If you are for English verses there is on my part an end of the matter." Here he was persuaded to compromise. Since Thomson accepted the Scottish verses, which it was the main desire of Burns to contribute, he with characteristic good nature did his best to oblige him in the matter of English verses, with a result that substantially corroborates his own modest estimate of his accomplishments as an English lyrist. Nor, although his contributions to Thomson's publication include one or two of his most famous songs, are the majority—even those not peculiarly English in character, specially written for Thomson's work—worthy to be ranked as of more than second-class merit, a fact of which he was himself perfectly aware; for while he proposed to defer "the sublimer and more pathetic airs until more leisure, as they will take, and deserve, a greater effort," he intimated to Thomson that if he meant all his songs in his collection to be poetry of the first merit, he

would find more difficulty than he was aware of. "There is," he goes on to say, "a peculiar rhythmus in many of our airs, and a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis, or what I would call the feature-notes of the tune, that cramps the poet and lays him under almost insuperable difficulties. For instance, in the air, 'My Wife's a Wanton Wee Thing,' if a few lines, smooth and pretty, can be adapted to it, it is all that you can expect."

The date of one or two of the principal lyrics or lyrical revisals, sent by Burns to Johnson's *Museum*, is uncertain; but, supposing we count the doubtful ones as belonging to the later period (1793-96), the most fruitful years of Burns, even as lyricist, preceded his connection with Thomson. The most famous productions of those later years are perhaps "Open the Door to me, O," "Scots Wha Hae," "Is there for Honest Poverty," "The Dumfries Volunteers," "O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast," and—if they belong to this period—those two exquisite reproductions, "A Red, Red Rose," and "'Twas a' for our Richtfu' King"; but in the case of the latter two he obtained his main inspiration from the old originals; and although it is clear that his hand had not lost its cunning when the mood favoured him, the favourable mood was apparently becoming rarer than of yore.

His readiness—even in opposition to his own better judgment—to oblige Thomson, and the fact that here he had not, as in the case of Johnson's *Museum*, an absolutely free hand (Thomson having the assurance to look the gift-horses he got from Burns in the mouths), may partly explain some of his comparative failures; but the lack of his wonted spirit and fire—even when we have the old consummate felicity of diction—is apparent in the bulk of his semi-Scottish lyrics, whether Chloris or another be the “fine woman,” whom, for the particular purpose, he “put himself in a regimen of admiring.” All, though of varying degrees of merit, are—one has sorrowfully to confess—more or less contaminated by the “namby - pamby” which he himself recognised as constituting, in its undiluted form, the essence of some of his purely English songs. It is, moreover, to be remembered that his songs include all the best efforts of his genius during those later years. His experiments in other forms of verse were few, and none of them are specially happy examples of his art. Such familiar poetic epistles as he wrote are of slight poetic merit, and, compared with those of his earlier years, might almost, in his own words, be termed “draunting drivel”; and though some of his later political ballads are replete with caustic cleverness, in none of them does he reproduce

the spirit of the old ballad with such signal success as in "The Five Carlins," written in 1789. The later years were, it is true, specially prolific of epigrams, but in many of them the wit is overshadowed by the spite, and they embody few or none of his best qualities either as man or poet. Thus his hopes that by the "ripening and corrections of years" he would be able to produce something more "worth preserving" than his previous productions, remained unfulfilled. Doubtless the standard he set himself was high; but modest as he ever was in the estimate of his powers, one cannot believe that he was mistaken in his hopes, and that he had not in him to do better and more perfect work than he was ever fated to accomplish. The very excellence of his best achievements is indeed proof positive to the contrary. But whether lack of leisure, or uncongeniality of circumstances, or indifférent health be the cause, he had apparently by 1793 ceased to cherish the hopes of 1789. The suggestions of his friends, that he might gradually accumulate material sufficient for a new volume of verse were put aside, and such new pieces as he deemed it advisable to publish he forwarded, almost gratuitously, to Creech, for inclusion in a new edition, which Creech was then contemplating. In a letter to Thomson on 7th April he also, by way of proclaiming his future poetic





ROBERT BURNS IN HIS LATE YEARS

*From the miniature by Alexander Reid in the  
Scottish National Portrait Gallery*



intentions, virtually intimated a decision to abandon his more ambitious aims. Indeed, his words might be interpreted as going even farther than this, and implying the foreboding conviction that as poet he had not much more to achieve, that the best of life was now past for him, and that he might, before very long, be altogether done with it. "What," he writes, "with my early attachment to ballads, your book, etc., ballad-making is now as completely my hobby-horse as ever fortification was Uncle Toby's; so I'll e'en canter it away till I come to the limit of my race—God grant that I may take the right side of the winning post!—and then cheerfully looking back on the honest folks with whom I have been happy, I shall say, or sing, 'Sae Merry as we a' hae been!' and, raising my last looks to the whole human race, the last words of the voice of Coila shall be, 'Good-night and Joy be wi you a'!'"

That Burns was in indifferent health and spirits during most of the Dumfries years hardly admits of doubt. All his life long he had been subject to spells of severe hypochondria. They were perhaps in part the complement of his highly strung nervous system, though the hypochondriac tendency had been aggravated by the nervous damage sustained from the excessive hardships of his youth. It was also unfortunate that his constitution never afterwards had quite fair-play,



and that his periods of good luck were few and far between. Thus the tendency received exceptional encouragement. It almost inevitably manifested itself whenever he was specially worried by cares and difficulties; and it must be remembered that it was only during the short period immediately following his Edinburgh success that he was quite free from the harassment of chronic poverty. When, shortly after settling at Ellisland, it was brought home to him that his farming scheme was about to be a losing concern, how keen must have been his sense of worldly defeat! And still more despondent must have been his thoughts when, shortly after this, he came to discern that even with the aid of his excise salary he would be unable to go on paying the Ellisland rent. On 20th December 1789 he wrote to Provost Maxwell of Lochmaben: "I might write you on farming, on building, on marketing; but my poor distracted mind is so torn, so jaded, so racked and bedeviled with the task of the superlatively damned, to make *one guinea do the business of three*, that I detest, abhor, and swoon at the very word 'business,' though no less than four letters of my short surname are in it." And that this was not a mere rhetorical expression of impatience we know from a letter to Mrs. Dunlop on the 18th of the same month. "For now near three

weeks I have been so ill with a nervous headache that I have been obliged for a time to give up my excise books, being scarce able to lift my head, much less to ride once a week over ten muir parishes." By settling as exciseman in Dumfries, he was relieved from the immediate dread of possible bankruptcy; but, owing in part to generous social habits, he was, ever and anon, threatened with an excess of expenditure over income; and what galled his proud spirit still more bitterly, he had been compelled in part to barter his intellectual and moral independence for his mess of pottage. Such a continuous concatenation of misfortunes was bound seriously to aggravate his constitutional weakness, and unhappily the comforts and counteractions he had recourse to were certain in the longrun to have a similar result. Even his celebrity and his personal charm became now in a sense leagued against him, for they led to invitations, which he could hardly decline, without laying himself open to the charge of incivility; and at most social gatherings in those days hard drinking ranked almost as a high social virtue. Regarding this, and regarding the injurious effects of hard drinking on himself, we have his own frequent testimony. Thus we find him, on 2nd January 1793, writing thus to Mrs. Dunlop: "As to myself, I am better, though not quite free of

my complaint. You must not think, as you seem to imagine, that in my way of life I want exercise. Of that I have enough; but occasional hard drinking is the devil to me. Against this I have again and again bent my resolution, and have greatly succeeded. Taverns I have totally abandoned; it is the private parties in the family way, among the hard-drinking gentlemen of this country, that do me the mischief—but even this I have more than half given over.” But, as we know, Burns neither abandoned taverns, nor ceased hard drinking at private parties. Unfortunately, also, about a year after he wrote the letter now quoted, he happened to be present at a hard-drinking party at Walter Riddell’s of Woodley Park, where he was led, by the madcap folly of his fellow-roisterers, into an act of rudeness towards his hostess, Mrs. Maria Riddell. Perhaps his chief offence was the implied reflection on the character of her own feelings towards him; but, for whatever cause, she, besides declining to accept his heartfelt apology, represented his conduct in such a light that in addition to losing the friendship of her brother-in-law, Captain Riddell, he became the subject of injurious gossip throughout the county. Though fully sensible that he had given her just cause of offence, Burns severely resented being made the special scape-goat of the occasion, maintaining that his conduct

was not more blameworthy than that of others. "To the men of the company," thus he wrote to her,—"I will make no apology. Your husband, who insisted on my drinking more than I chose, has no right to blame me; and the other gentlemen were partakers of my guilt." The resentment shown by the Riddells he naturally attributed to the fact that he lacked the social standing of the other guests. This was an insufferable blow to his pride, and hence the exceptional bitterness expressed in his epigrams against both husband and wife—a bitterness so excessive as, especially in the case of the lady, to deprive the epigrams of real point and force, and by their ludicrous exhibition of impotent wrath to turn the laugh rather against himself than the subject of his lampoons. That the incident tended to make him more reckless in his habits, and more careless of his reputation, is quite conceivable; and of its injurious effects on his spirits we have a striking indication in a letter to Alexander Cunningham, 25th February 1794: "For these two months I have not been able to lift a pen. My constitution and frame were, *ab origine*, blasted with a deep incurable taint of hypochondria, which poisons my existence. Of late, a number of domestic vexations, and some pecuniary share in the ruin of these cursed times—losses which, though trifling, were what I could

ill bear—have so irritated me, that my feelings at times could only be envied by a reprobate spirit listening to the sentence that dooms it to perdition.”

The Riddell quarrel formed, no doubt, an admirable theme for the censorious portion of the community, especially for such of them as the well-known opinions of Burns on social and ecclesiastical topics had deeply offended. Others never forgot that they had been the subject of his wit. “His wit,” says Mrs. Riddell with great magnanimity, “had always the start of his judgment, and would lead him to the indulgence of raillery uniformly acute, but often unaccompanied with the least desire to wound. The suppression of an arch and full-pointed *bon mot*, from dread of injuring its object, the sage of Zurich very properly classes as ‘a virtue only to be sought for in the Calendar of Saints’; if so, Burns must not be dealt with unconscientiously for being rather deficient in it. He paid the forfeit of his talents as dearly as any one could do. ’Twas no extravagant arithmetic to say of him (as of Yorick), ‘that for every ten jokes he got a hundred enemies,’ but much allowance should be made by a candid mind for the splenetic warmth of a spirit ‘which distress had often spited with the world,’ and which, unbounded in its intellectual sallies and pursuits,

continually experienced the curbs imposed by the waywardness of his fortune." She also refers to certain paragraphs that had appeared soon after his death in the public prints as evidence that "private animosities have not yet subsided, and that envy has not yet exhausted all its shafts." But how far the reputation of Burns in his later years has unjustly suffered from injurious, malignant, or incompetent gossip it is now impossible to determine. With the great bulk of the Dumfries community he was exceedingly popular; but he was by far its most noted citizen, and the light that beat upon his arm-chair on the Mill Vennel was almost as fierce as that which beats upon a throne. About him, as about other celebrities, evil rumours were easily invented and easily spread; and evil rumours, like a rolling snowball, generally gain in magnitude as they proceed. For the publication of the results of the more injurious gossip, Currie and Robert Chambers are mainly responsible; and both seem to have been partly actuated by a, not uncommon, notion, that those in a somewhat humble social station afford more fitting themes than those in higher positions, for the indulgence in edifying moralisings on human weaknesses. Currie, who entertained extreme opinions as to the evil effects of indulgence in stimulants, showed at least a lamentable lack of regard for

the feelings of the dead poet's immediate relatives, for whom he was acting; and Chambers, who essayed to follow up the trails of all surviving gossip, not only took upon him to assume his perfect competence for such a task, but was so confident in the adequacy of his judgment, as to suppose that his opinions must be accepted very much on his own *ipse dixit*. So far as one can judge from the statements of Burns himself, and from such conflicting testimony as survives, it is probable that, though perhaps not so much given to hard drinking as many a reputable squire,<sup>1</sup> or even judge or statesman of the period, his occasional excesses, and his pretty constant indulgences at taverns, had seriously affected a constitution which was specially sensitive to this kind of injury. Unless, however, we reject the statement that his last illness was caused, or aggravated, by his having fallen asleep in the snow, after a convivial meeting, there is no sufficient ground for supposing that his constitution had been quite undermined by his excesses. A letter of his own, said to be corroborative of the story, was some years ago announced to be in the possession of an admirer, who, however, with exquisite inconsequence, declined, from regard to the poet's reputation,

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Burns's poem "The Whistle," and his introduction to it.

to permit the publication of any of its definite statements. Had Burns been reputedly a person of perfectly sober habits, the resolve to keep silent about the letter could be understood; but to announce its existence and to decline to publish it, even in part, while quite irrational in itself, becomes still more preposterous when we bear in mind how perfectly well known it is that Burns occasionally got pretty drunk. Besides, there might be, in this instance, a special reason for the accidental misfortune. That, while weakened by recent illness, he should have been unable to carry his liquor as well as usual is not surprising; while the fact that no one convoyed him home points to the supposition that his usual custom was to walk home unassisted. But the important point is, that such an unfortunate accident would sufficiently explain the collapse of his health, which, apart from this, might be attributed to the direct consequences of his irregularities. The date of the occurrence—on which the letter would probably throw some light—is also of some moment, as it would decide, what is still doubtful, whether the accident was the originating or only the aggravating cause of his final illness.

Be the causes what they may, a rheumatic fever had attacked him in or before January 1796. Whether its effects were accidentally



aggravated or not, his constitution completely broke down under them; and a gradual decay of strength supervened, which, strong man though he had been, ended in his death on 21st July 1796, in his thirty-seventh year. During all the spring and summer he had almost given up hope of recovery, though he still continued (intermittently), on Thomson's behalf, to "woo the Muses." How much resolution this implied may be inferred from his own statement to Thomson. "'By Babel streams I have sat and wept.' Almost ever since I wrote you last, I have only known existence by the pressure of the heavy hand of sickness, and have counted time by the repercussions of pain! Rheumatism, cold, and fever have formed to me a terrible Trinity in Unity, which makes me close my eyes in misery and open them without hope!" To Cunningham he also wrote on 7th July: "For these eight or ten months I have been ailing, sometimes bedfast and sometimes not; but these last three months I have been tortured with an excruciating rheumatism, which has reduced me to nearly the last stage. You actually would not know me if you saw me. Pale, emaciated, and so feeble as occasionally to need help from my chair—my spirits fled! fled!—but I can no more on the subject." But his illness brought out prominently some of his best qualities: his silent stoicism,

his prevailing good nature, his delicate consideration for others, his deep regard for his friends, and his cordial feelings towards those who had partly estranged themselves from him, but whom he sincerely respected. The last trait is more particularly revealed in his moving farewell letter to Mrs. Dunlop, and his long farewell interview with Mrs. Riddell. A single matter only made him partially lose his self-control. Some ten days before his death, he received from a Dumfries solicitor a letter demanding payment of £7, 4s., which he owed to a local draper for his volunteer uniform. The possibility that he might end his days in a jail made him "half distracted," and no doubt accelerated his death. The friends to whom, with great hesitation and pain, he applied in his difficulty were only too pleased to have an opportunity of obliging him; but the incident dwelt in his memory, and was not forgotten even in his last moments. Grim poverty, which from his childhood had been perhaps his deadliest enemy, had in reserve for him a final sting; and his last words were "a muttered execration against the legal agent" who was the unwitting instrument in perturbing his spirit at its "mortal passage."

Having been a volunteer, Burns was, on 25th July, buried in St. Michael's churchyard, Dumfries, with military honours. In 1815 the body was

placed in a mausoleum erected by public subscription. The funeral was the occasion for a great manifestation of public regret. Death was necessary to awake the hearts of his countrymen to a proper appreciation of the remarkable man, who had spent amongst them a life of lowly toil and penury. Not till his spirit had

“Outsoared the shadows of our night”

did they begin to rank him with the “kings of thought,” or to estimate aright the character of his priceless legacy. The real worth of the legacy could indeed only be unfolded by the progress of time. In the case of many, its own educative influence was necessary to its proper appreciation; and even those of his contemporaries, well versed in literature and of comparatively open mind, were too enslaved to the conventionalities of their time to do it adequate justice. He himself was of opinion that he would be “more respected” a hundred years after his death, than he was during life by his Dumfries neighbours; and his prognostic has been amply verified. His increasing popularity with all classes of his countrymen is one of the most notable phenomena of Scottish social history during the nineteenth century. That popularity may manifest itself in forms that are often not a little bizarre, and sometimes more

than not a little gross; but one may hazard a hope that, after the lapse of another hundred years, appreciation, in the case of the general, will have become less crude; and that admiration, having gained in adequacy and depth, will have declined in blatancy. His truer and higher influences are, of course, bound to gain more and more ascendancy, while what is merely spurious and mistaken will gradually win less and less assent. But even those partly misled by what is spurious cannot wholly fail of finding benefit by contact with so much that is so great, both in conception and expression.

Burns owes his unique place as the national poet of Scotland, in part to the unique character of his life, and more especially to his lowly birth and peasant experiences. It is, perhaps, as the exponent of the broad social feelings and the common joys and hopes of humanity, that he is most widely appreciated. His dialect also is the dialect of the people, not merely in its outward form, but in much of its vital essence; and, in addition, his method, both in form and spirit, was in strong accord with Scottish national tradition. But he was no mere common peasant poet; for besides that the old Scottish traditional art was one of high accomplishment, his thoughts had been broadened, and his powers of expression, as already stated, disciplined and refined, by an

extensive knowledge of the classic literature of England; and, what is of more moment, such was the greatness of his endowment, that, as poet, he was enabled in great part to triumph over his peasant circumstances. The main individual characteristics—apart from his remarkable gifts of a purely artistic nature—by which he triumphed, were the fulness and intensity of his emotions. To them also was due—his circumstances being originally what they were—the partial failure of his life in certain social and temporal respects, a failure which also impeded his highest poetic ambitions; but while his partial failure primarily concerned himself, his achievement was a benefaction to the world. Though that achievement be but a fragmentary representation of his poetic possibilities, it entitles him to, at least, a very high rank among lyrists, and includes certain specimens of genius—such as “The Jolly Beggars” and “Tam o’ Shanter”—which manifest his essential kinship with even the greatest of the world’s bards.



THE HOUSE IN DUMFRIES IN WHICH BURNS DIED



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